



Public appointments – awareness, attitudes and experiences

Abstract

This project examines public views of public appointments, including levels of awareness, general attitudes and previous experiences. The survey findings show that awareness remains low, and that only a minority of people have direct or indirect experience of public appointments. There are some different perceptions across demographic groups, including those currently under-represented on public boards: women, ethnic minority groups and people with disabilities. This suggests that the Government may need to engage diverse audiences in different ways. Overall though, the public say that the best way to get them more interested is to demonstrate how public appointments make a direct impact on their lives and communities.

Key findings

- Knowledge of public appointments remains low among the public (14% say they know a great deal or fair amount about them). This is consistent with findings in 2004, when 10% of people in England said they knew a great deal or fair amount about ‘the way in which ministerial public appointments are made’.
- Men are more likely to claim that they know about public appointments (16% compared to 12% of women) as are those from an ethnic minority background (22% compared to 12% among White respondents).
- Around one in eight people say they have held a position on a committee or board for a public organisation (13%), though 30% say they know someone else who has. Those who know someone who has held a public appointment are more likely to claim knowledge about public appointments and to say they would consider applying in future.
- White respondents are more likely than those from ethnic minority backgrounds to actually know somebody who has been on a committee or board of a public organisation.
- A large majority of the public (89%) say they have never considered applying for a national public appointment. Twenty-two per cent say this is because it had never occurred to them, 10% because they weren’t aware of public appointments.
- Men are more likely than women to say they would consider applying for public appointments (17% and 12% respectively). Similarly, those from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely than those from White backgrounds to be interested in applying in future (27% and 12% respectively).
- People with a disability are more likely than average to say it is difficult for “people like me” to apply for a public appointment (33% compared to 23% overall), as well as being more likely to feel that the application process is not fair and open (18% compared to 13% overall).
- People report that the best way to get them more interested in public appointments is to demonstrate how these positions make a direct impact on their lives through benefits to their community, benefits to society or how an organisation directly affects their family.
- Using the internet is the most popular method of finding out more about public appointments vacancies (26%), followed by local or regional newspapers (17%), local council (15%), and information from friends and family (14%). Government websites (12%) are slightly more popular than national newspapers (9%).

Background

As at March 2008, women formed 33% of public appointees, ethnic minorities 5.7% and people with disabilities 5%.

By 2011, for all new UK public appointments regulated by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA), the Government's aim is for 50% of new public appointments to be women, 14% to be disabled people and 11% to be people from ethnic minorities. These targets were launched in June 2009 along with a cross-Government action plan to underpin them, co-led by the Government Equalities Office and the Cabinet Office.

This research aims to update understanding of levels of public awareness of public appointments since the last survey was undertaken in 2004, and to identify any differences in awareness, attitudes and the experiences of under-represented groups in relation to public appointments.

Research findings

Knowledge of public appointments

- Three in ten people (30%) say that being on the board of a public agency or public body is a public appointment. However, a greater proportion thinks that being an elected politician (43%) is a public appointment, while one in four (24%) identify public appointments with having a job in the civil service.
- Knowledge of public appointments is low (14% say they know a great deal or fair amount). A significant minority (44%) say they know nothing at all. This is consistent with findings in 2004, when 10% of people in England said they knew a great deal or fair amount about 'the way in which ministerial public appointments are made'.¹

- As such, most people are unsure what a public appointment is, and the majority claim they know just a little or nothing about them (80%).
- Knowledge of where public appointments are advertised is also low. Over half say they know nothing about where public appointments are advertised, with a similar number saying they know nothing about how people can apply for a public appointment. Just 13% say they know at least a fair amount about where public appointments are advertised.
- Men are more likely to claim that they know about public appointments (16% compared to 12% of women) as are those from an ethnic minority background (22% compared to 12% among White respondents).
- People in the North of England are also more likely to say they know nothing at all about public appointments – 51% compared with 44% on average.
- There is greater knowledge about public appointments among those classed as social grade AB², those educated to degree level or higher, and those who own or have a mortgage on their home.

Experience of public appointments

- Thirteen per cent of people say they hold or have held a position on a committee or board for a public organisation. Overall, three in ten (30%) say they know someone else who holds or has ever held such a position.
- The demographic groups with greater experience of public appointments (either themselves or through family or friends) mirror those who say they know more about them – those educated to degree level or higher, those classed as social grade AB, and owner-occupiers.

¹ Perceptions of the Ministerial Public Appointments Process – Ipsos MORI on behalf of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (February 2005).

² Those who live in a household where the chief income earner is in a professional or managerial occupation are classified as social grade AB.

- Those who know someone who has held a public appointment are more likely to claim knowledge about public appointments and to say they would consider applying in future.
- People from White backgrounds, however, are more likely than those from ethnic minority backgrounds to actually know somebody who has been on a committee or board of a public organisation, despite the greater knowledge about public appointments in general claimed among those from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Applying for public appointments

- Nine out of ten (89%) people say they have never considered applying for a national public appointment.
- The main reasons reported for not applying for public appointments are a lack of interest and time or because it had never occurred to people. However, some people also appear to be put off applying because they feel it is not relevant to their lives, because they do not feel they know enough about how to go about applying; or because they feel they lack appropriate qualifications.
- Reflecting their greater knowledge about public appointments generally the middle classes (those classed as social grade AB, educated to degree level or higher, owner-occupiers) are more likely to apply or consider applying for public appointments.
- Men are also more likely than women to say they would consider applying (17% and 12% respectively). Similarly, those from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely than those from White backgrounds to be interested in applying in future (27% and 12% respectively).
- In terms of how easy it is for “people like me” to apply for public appointments, most people do not know (26%) or only offer a neutral opinion (31%), confirming the lack of knowledge most people have

about public appointments in general. Among those who do express an opinion, roughly similar proportions agree (19%) and disagree (23%) that applying for public appointments is easy for people like them.

- People with a disability are more likely than average to say it is difficult for ‘people like me’ to apply for a public appointment, Others who feel that it is not easy for ‘people like me’ are those with no formal qualifications, those classed as social grade DE³ and those who rent their accommodation.
- Seventeen per cent say the application process is fair and open; while a lower proportion (13%) disagree. There is also a lack of knowledge about the fairness of the application process with 37% of people remaining neutral on the subject and a further 33% saying they do not know. People with a disability are more likely than average to disagree that the process is open and fair.

Finding out more about public appointments

- In line with other research, people say the best way to get them more interested in public appointments is to demonstrate the direct impact on their own lives and communities.
- Around one in five (22%) say that feeling strongly about the issue would encourage them to find out more, while others would be encouraged by seeing how it would benefit the local community (17%) or how it would benefit society as a whole (14%). Clear information about the application process is also essential (for 14%), while others might be encouraged if the organisation directly affected them or their family (14%).
- In terms of finding out more, an internet search is the most commonly mentioned method (26%) while others would look in a

³ Those who live in a household where the chief income earner is a semi or unskilled manual worker, a state pensioner, or is unemployed and relying on state benefits are classified as social grade DE.



local or regional newspaper (17%) or consult their local council (15%), and a similar proportion would prefer to rely on friends and family for information (14%). Government websites (12%) are slightly more popular than national newspapers (9%).

Conclusions

The main conclusions from the research were:

- Raising knowledge of public appointments in general remains a significant challenge.
- Engaging certain groups (women, those from the North of England and those in lower social grades) will be important if the Government is to realise its aim of increasing diversity across the boards of public bodies. To this end, challenging the view that public appointees have to be a certain 'type' of person (older, university-educated and middle class) should remain a priority⁴, while also making it clear how these positions are relevant to people's real, day-to-day lives.
- Further work to understand and capitalise on greater interest among people from ethnic minority backgrounds could be a key way of improving diversity on public boards.

- Disabled people are less positive about the fairness of public appointments and their relevance to 'people like me'. It will be important to understand further the reasons for this and address these concerns if disabled people are to be encouraged to apply for positions on public boards.
- Overall, demonstrating to people that becoming a public appointee can lead to real influence over issues that matter to them is vital, even if it would not convince everyone to get involved.

About the project

Questions about public appointments were included on the Ipsos MORI Omnibus (Capibus), a regular survey among the general public. An additional 119 ethnic minority respondents were surveyed in order to increase the sample size for ethnic minority respondents (238 overall).

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, in respondents' homes, using CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing) between 23 and 29 October 2009. All data are weighted to the national known profile of adults aged 15+ in Great Britain.

⁴ Perceptions of the Ministerial Public Appointments Process – Ipsos MORI on behalf of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (February 2005). The qualitative research found that

Further information

The full report, **Public appointments – awareness, attitudes and experiences** by **Daniel Cameron and Gideon Skinner** at Ipsos MORI is published by the Government Equalities Office (GEO).

To order further free copies of these Research Findings or the full report please contact GEO Enquiries (details below) or download a copy free of charge from www.equalities.gov.uk. We will consider requests for alternative formats that may be required. Please send your request to:

GEO Enquiries, Government Equalities Office, Floor 9, Eland House, Bressenden Place, London SW1E 5DU. Email: enquiries@geo.gsi.gov.uk Tel: 0303 444 0000 Fax: 020 7944 0602.

Although this research was commissioned by the Government Equalities Office, the findings and recommendations are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the GEO.