

Diversity in Public Appointments

The State of the Nation Report 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This *State of the Nation* report provides an independent assessment of diversity in Scotland's public appointments system. Commissioned by the Ethical Standards Commissioner (ESC), the research is intended to inform, not pre-determine, the development of the Commissioner's new diversity strategy for public appointments.

The report builds on the 2008 *Diversity Delivers* strategy, offering a comprehensive review of progress, examining how Scotland's landscape has changed since then, and identifying practices that have the potential to improve representation and governance. Its purpose is not to prescribe a single solution, but to provide an evidence base to stimulate further discussion and engagement.

PURPOSE

The Commissioner has a statutory obligation to publish and promote a refreshed strategy for increasing board diversity and to consult widely in preparing it. This report provides a foundation for that process by:

- Reviewing the progress achieved under *Diversity Delivers*.
- Examining shifts in Scottish society, law, policy, and workplace culture since 2008.
- Assessing the effectiveness of public appointment practices.
- Drawing on data analysis, literature review, and interviews to identify barriers and enablers to greater diversity.
- Offering prompts and perspectives to guide stakeholder consultation.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Progress and Continuing Gaps

- The number of women holding public appointments has improved significantly, with many boards now close to parity in terms of the proportion of men and women who sit on them.
- Incremental progress has been made in ethnic diversity, but boards still do not fully reflect Scotland's population.
- Disabled people, younger applicants, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds remain consistently underrepresented.
- Urban–rural disparities are evident, with greater diversity in city-based boards.

2. Recruitment and Appointment Practices

- The introduction of the 2022 *Code of Practice* has created opportunities for more flexible, outcome-focused approaches.
- However, implementation is inconsistent. Positive action strategies and innovative assessment methods are permitted, but they are not widely or confidently applied.
- The process is often seen as overly bureaucratic, time-consuming, and inaccessible, limiting applicant diversity.
- Feedback provided to unsuccessful candidates is limited, weakening the pipeline of potential future applicants.

3. Broader Cultural and Legal Context

- Scotland's demographic profile has changed markedly, with greater ethnic and religious diversity, higher disability prevalence, and shifts in immigration patterns.
- Legal developments, including the Equality Act 2010 and recent judicial clarifications, shape the boundaries within which diversity initiatives must operate.
- Public attitudes towards equality, diversity, and inclusion are evolving, but tokenistic, compliance-driven or ideological approaches risk undermining trust.

4. Implications for Governance

- Evidence suggests that cognitive diversity (differences in perspective, skills, and experience) has the strongest link to board performance, but it is often overlooked.
- Boards benefit from diversity of thought when there is strong integration and an inclusive culture. Poorly managed diversity can lead to conflict or tokenism.
- Recruitment strategies must be merit based, requiring stakeholders to consider what 'good' means in the context of governance generally, but also to individual boards.

NEXT STEPS

The Commissioner intends this report to act as a **starting point for dialogue**. The findings will be tested and refined through consultation with stakeholders, including current and aspiring board members, public bodies, and communities. The goal is to co-create a refreshed diversity strategy that is evidence-informed, legally sound, and practically deliverable.

- The next phase of work will therefore:
- Invite feedback on the findings and recommendations.
- Seek additional insights on barriers and opportunities.
- Develop concrete, outcome-focused measures for Scotland's refreshed strategy on diversity in public appointments.



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SC651359
www.leadingkind.co.uk
hello@leadingkind.co.uk