

Ethical Standards Commissioner

HARNESSING BOARD ROOM DIVERSITY – SCOTTISH FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

The difference that diversity
makes to your board's governance

February 2019

BODY: SCOTTISH FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

CATEGORY: HOLISTIC

KEY LEARNING POINTS FROM THIS CASE STUDY

- *Learn to adopt better structured and more strategic board engagement with diverse communities and stakeholders*
- *Find out how to foster a clear understanding of the different dimensions of diversity to better inform board discussions and define executive and non-executive roles and responsibilities*
- *Learn how to embed a shared awareness of and commitment to continuous improvement.*

Background

Having been set up initially as a completely new Board in 2013, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) has developed a comprehensive, strategic and integrated approach to diversity during the course of its first five years.

It is recognised that without harnessing diversity of thought, diversity of experience and diversity of skills the Board will be unable to effectively deliver SFRS's main purpose:

'to work in partnership with communities, the public and private sectors and other agencies on fire safety, prevention, protection and emergency response to improve the safety and wellbeing of people throughout Scotland'.

This also overlays directly onto the four organisational values of: Teamwork, Innovation, Respect and Safety – where diversity is proactively considered as part of each dimension.

Since its creation the Board has been confident in adopting and where needed, adapting approaches to ensure that issues of diversity shape its overall governance role and activity, rather than being standalone initiatives. For example, a conscious choice was made to move from an 'equalities champion' on the Board to more structured mechanisms for embedding equality and diversity in all Board members' roles. There is a clear understanding of where issues relating to demography and protected characteristics both overlap with and are distinct from other valued diversity around skills, experience, knowledge, background, engagement etc.

Main areas with diversity focus for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Board and the difference that they make to the way diversity is harnessed

Area of focus	Activities
<p>ENGAGEMENT <i>Better structured and more strategic Board engagement with diverse communities and stakeholders</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better targeting of particular stakeholder / community groups on key issues • Enhanced strategic focus on topical issues • Greater role clarity between Non-Executives and Senior Leadership Team leading to more mature relationships • Outreach activities around Board meetings that ensure greater relevance and impact • Board members are better informed on local, regional or thematic issues by those most directly affected
<p>CLARITY OF REMIT <i>The role of the Board and between Non-Exec and Exec staff is well articulated in the light of diversity (both Board composition and actions)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The skills mix of the Board adapts rapidly with changing circumstances and needs • More nuanced skills such as ‘emotional intelligence’ in governance practice have been identified, articulated and measured • Such skills are embedded in appointment, development and performance management frameworks • Close relationship with SG sponsor department ensures diversity in appointments delivers measureable benefit
<p>FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT <i>Board members and senior executive leaders use formal and informal routes to develop behaviour</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal and group behaviour becomes more conscious and its impact more closely measured • Emotional intelligence is closely linked to a wider understanding of harnessing difference as a Board • Collaborative and open consideration is given to contentious issues – members can supportively hold each other to account for language and behaviour resulting in better decision-making processes • Appraisal and development happens at group and individual level with mid-year reviews, self-evaluation and clear personal development goals
<p>AN IMPROVEMENT CULTURE <i>A shared awareness of and commitment to continuous improvement</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning and insight is embedded in ongoing Board practices • All Board members gain expertise from the successful deployment of diverse skills and approaches • A balancing of styles and approaches ensures a creative tension that delivers more effective governance outcomes

The key elements in achieving the difference and how the activity is maintained

ENGAGEMENT

Engagement activities and other governance priorities are now coordinated by a Board Support team that includes senior managers who match skill-sets and engagement roles, which was set out clearly and in agreement with the Board. This helps ensure activity is balanced across the Board, co-ordinated, targeted, outcome-focused and delivers measureable benefit. It also reduces any risks of role confusion between Board and Senior Leadership Team or of people getting inadvertently drawn into 'side-projects' or over-personalised responses.

In 2018 Audit Scotland published their Best Value report of the SFRS where it details the progress made and states, a well-structured Corporate template for reporting to the Board is now being used giving a sound platform for information to be noted or decisions to be taken.

CLARITY OF REMIT

The Board continuously cross-references its key operational and strategic priorities against its own skillsets (e.g. community engagement / third sector interface specialist with the ability to broker strategically between stakeholders). This enables better deployment of resources between Executive and Non-Executive staff with clear communication and alignment back into the whole Board to ensure shared learning and new insights from diverse experiences on a local or individual level.

FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT

From induction training through Board development days and one-to-one performance appraisal, specific coaching / training / workshops is given to encourage a positive attitude to both giving and receiving challenging feedback and learning/adapting from that. Board members are able to leverage very different perspectives on issues and have difficult conversations in a positive mind-set. Targeted training on 'Using intelligent questioning to improve scrutiny' is building trust and delivering better performance outcomes from Executive leaders. The Board and Senior Leadership Team have separate off-site development days and then come together on a second day well prepared to listen, challenge and align for common benefit. Clear and well-delivered personal performance structure for all Non-Executives are at the heart of this and these are actively used to shape role remit and Board skills matrices.

To ensure Board behaviours are structured around a set of standards, the Board uses the SFRS Code of Corporate Governance 'The Code' which is a living document with six principles taken from the 'Good Governance Standard for Public Services' that are reviewed regularly at the Integrated Governance Committee of the Board.

AN IMPROVEMENT CULTURE

Equality and diversity are understood as a core responsibility of the whole Board and intrinsic to the organisation's fundamental values. Equality and diversity are seen as intrinsic to effective governance and not some kind of 'add on'. There is a clear understanding of where there may be 'dominant discourses' as well as 'unheard insights'. From this a well-evidenced and strategic view can be developed by the Board on where, why and how it can best engage with both of these. At the same time, diverse perspectives are actively encouraged and increased levels of 'emotional intelligence' mean such contributions are handled more impactfully. A thoughtful and nuanced understanding of the SFRS's internal and external communication channels mean messages are properly tailored to diverse audiences and their desired impact.

"We must embrace difference as a Board even when it feels tricky. If we constantly challenge ourselves and others to receive contrary views warmly and start from the belief that they are offered with benevolent intent, we will achieve a constructive tension that makes us better in our overall governance role"

Kirsty Darwent – Board Chair

The diversity in governance indicators in evidence

- Board members have the confidence to air disparate viewpoints and to challenge constructively
- Enhanced engagement allows greater knowledge exchange and resource sharing
- Different skills, knowledge, experience and perspectives are deployed allowing more comprehensive challenge and more productive scrutiny
- Board members can show how their own skills and understanding have developed
- There is increased confidence and trust amongst board and executive leaders within the organisation as well as from stakeholders and communities

Checklist for actions that boards that wish to replicate these activities can use

- ✓ Establish a board support team that includes senior operation managers who match skill-sets and engagement roles. Task the team with coordinating engagement activities and other governance priorities.
- ✓ Make time for the board to regularly cross-reference its key operational and strategic priorities against its own skillsets.
- ✓ Acknowledge, value, develop and measure the contribution made by people's personal qualities such as emotional intelligence.
- ✓ Use Board information events, induction, training, workshops, board development days and one-to-one performance appraisal to provide specific coaching/training which encourages a positive attitude to both giving and receiving challenging feedback and learning/adapting from that.

Ethical Standards Commissioner

- ✓ Provide targeted training on emotionally intelligent techniques such as 'using intelligent questioning to improve scrutiny'.
- ✓ Run separate offsite development days for the Board and Senior Leadership Team. Come together on a second day with the common understanding that participants must be well prepared to listen, challenge and align for common benefit.
- ✓ Host a dedicated Board SharePoint site giving access to key information that supports the diverse needs of Board members in performing their role and improving their effectiveness.
- ✓ Adopt a clear personal performance structure for all non-executives and ensure that it is properly implemented. Use the results of such assessments to inform board member roles and remits and to update skills matrices and identify common themes.
- ✓ Establish clear arrangements for regularly reviewing the effectiveness of the Board in all aspects of its governance
- ✓ Ensure that equality and diversity are understood as a core responsibility of the whole board and intrinsic to the organisation's fundamental values. Actively encourage diverse perspectives from within and outwith the Board.
- ✓ Develop a thoughtful and nuanced understanding of the body's internal and external communication channels so that messages can be properly tailored to diverse audiences and their desired impact.

Further contact / information

SFRS Board Support Team

E: SFRS.BoardSupport@firescotland.gov.uk

Group Manager Alasdair Cameron | M: 07786 856986 | T: 01738 452142 | E:
alasdair.cameron@firescotland.gov.uk

Debbie Haddow Executive PA to Chair of Board | M:07341 880523 | T: 01738 452144 | E:
debbie.haddow@firescotland.gov.uk

Marion Lang Corporate Admin | M: 07887 627387 | T: 0141 646 4687 | E:
marion.lang@firescotland.gov.uk