Muslim Women: Political and Civic Engagement in the UK

2011

The Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations (CRER) based at the University of Warwick is the major academic body in the UK for the research and teaching of aspects of race, migration and ethnic relations.

www.2.warwick.ac.uk

The Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) is the UK's largest organisation for funding research on economic and social issues, who support independent, high quality research which has an impact on business, the public sector and the third sector.

www.esrc.ac.uk

Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK) is a national network of women to share knowledge, connect the voices, and promote the needs of diverse Muslim women.

www.mwnuk.co.uk

THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

E·S·R·C ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

MWNUK

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Vision: "Our vision is of a society where Muslim women have an effective voice and opportunity to contribute equally to society."

Mission: "A UK network of women to share knowledge, connect the voices, and promote the needs of diverse Muslim women."

Muslim Women's Network UK

Introduction

The **Women's National Commission (WNC)**, which was the official, independent advisory body giving views of women to Government was closed on 31st December 2010. The **Government Equalities Office (GEO)** therefore took some of the functions of WNC over centrally and prepared a consultation exercise to engage with women across the UK in 2011.

Rather than wait to be consulted, **Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK)** in partnership with the **Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations at the University of Warwick** contacted GEO to arrange a national roundtable discussion with Muslim women. This was held on 29th November 2010 and 14 Muslim women from around the UK from diverse ethnic backgrounds and diverse fields of work participated. Women who were unable to participate in this meeting were given the opportunity to provide their views through an email questionnaire.

> *Shaista Gohir MBE, Muslim Women's Network UK:* "*Those Muslim women that are exercising their political rights and duties and engaging in civic roles deserve to be recognized.*"

> *Dr Khursheed Wadia, University of Warwick:* "*Political decision makers need to stop pathologising Muslim women's presence in society, respond to their needs and ensure that they are afforded the means by which to maximize their contribution to society.*"

The discussions resulted in a detailed report that was formerly submitted to the government's consultation on **Strengthening Women's Voices** in Government. This guide provides a summary of the findings, which highlight how Muslim women can be encouraged and supported to increase their civic engagement and influence policies and decisions affecting their lives and their communities.

This guide also challenges stereotypes and demonstrates that not all Muslim women are apathetic and uninformed. It profiles women who are participating in public roles that are vital in our communities and for the future of our children.

Using Information Technology to Engage with Women

The New Government IT Platform

The government plans to establish a new IT platform to engage in online dialogue with individual women or those who are part of organisations. The digital communication tools would include: Facebook, Twitter, blogs, e-newsletters, teleconferencing, virtual discussion groups etc, which would also allow women to interact with each other. The government were therefore keen to find out which tools Muslim women were most likely to use, what would encourage their use, and the barriers discouraging them.

The Response from Muslim Women

Although those who participated already used one or more of the proposed communication tools in their private and professional life, they expressed serious reservations about them.

WHY CONSULT?

Those involved in third sector organisations felt they had already been 'consulted to death.' There was considerable doubt about whether the government's desire to engage was genuine or whether it merely constituted a tick-box exercise to demonstrate grassroots consultation and engagement in a democratic process.

"There have been numerous consultations or events where the government has claimed to be involving Muslim women. I have found all these events to be tokenistic so far. I feel there is no genuine interest in us."

Most women felt that the government was failing to explain clearly why consultations took place, how any views gathered were considered, what impact they made on decision making and what benefit could be derived from planned policy. This meant there was little incentive for them to take part. They also felt that government departments had their 'favourite consultees,' so the same views were sought time and time again to justify new initiatives and policy proposals.

TRUST

A majority of the women said they would only engage in online dialogue with the government if they were sure of being afforded privacy, anonymity, and secure storage of information. Many felt the government could not be trusted and information may be gathered for other purposes that were not being explicitly stated e.g. for counter terrorism use by MI5.

ACCESS

Participants said that those familiar with such technologies would be students, professionals and young people. There was concern that communicating via IT would be a challenge for many Muslim women due to access and not being able to use such tools. This was either because: they were from disadvantaged families and communities who could not afford IT; they are part of an older generation unwilling or unable to understand their use; they were from families who disapproved of social media; they could not communicate well enough in English.

LACK OF TIME AND DOMESTIC OBLIGATIONS

Some women felt that IT based media, generated high volumes of materials and that much of it was worthless. It was far too difficult for women with homes, families and jobs to find time to deal with much of the output from government, let alone have a prolonged meaningful discussion with them. However, there was acknowledgement that IT and social media could have a liberating effect on women tied to the home, enabling them to communicate with the outside world including government.

Conclusion

It was concluded that ultimately, communication through IT-based media, could only be seen as a useful adjunct to personal contact. It was felt that government needed to go into the heart of communities in order to understand the problems people faced, the issues of interest to them, and the resources that they needed. If government used new media as a stand-alone method of consultation and discussion then it would no doubt fail to engage with Muslim women as well as those from other communities.

ACTION POINTS
- Build trust with Muslim women and provide guarantees that any information provided online is not divulged to other parties and is kept confidential.
- Provide training on use of IT and social media.
- Information conveyed through IT media, is presented in an easy to comprehend language with easy to navigate layouts.
- Online consultations are also made available in paper format for those who have limited or no access to IT.
- New IT based communication e.g. internet, Facebook, Twitter, etc are used as an adjunct to face-to-face communication.
- Build trust and have better understanding of issues - high profile local and national politicians should go to the heart of Muslim communities to make contact with ordinary people.

Barriers to Involvement in Civic and Political Life

Muslim women raised issues of concern, which they felt constituted barriers to their participation in public life and wanted these addressed by government at both local and national levels. The problems varied according to socio-professional, generational, locational and other lines as Muslim women are not a homogeneous population. There are many different problems affecting Muslim communities across the UK, therefore those discussed at the round-table meeting merely constituted the tip of the iceberg. However, a number of key issues were identified:

• Intensification of Islamophobia
• Patriarchal structures and attitudes
  (within Muslim communities)
• Impact of government spending cuts
• Government policies impacting on Muslim
  communities
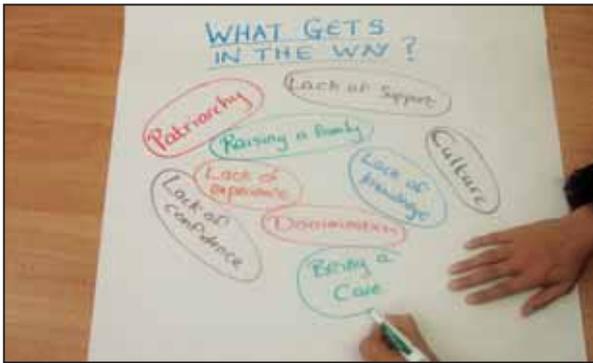
Intensification of Islamophobia

A key concern was the rise in Islamophobia, particularly since New York 9/11 and London 7/7, as it touched almost all aspects of life. This affected the way in which Muslims, especially women, were portrayed by politicians and media commentators who in turn influenced wider public opinion. This is resulting in women facing discrimination in education, employment, shops and public services as well as being subjected to verbal and physical abuse in the street.

"One of the greatest issues affecting me is the government's constant admonishing of the Muslim community, for either being extremist or supporting extremism."

There was fear that Islamophobia was affecting entire Muslim communities as some were becoming increasingly marginalized. The women were worried about the impact this would have on the long term life chances of their children who were already in a situation where they were not realising their educational potential.

"The issues affecting me and other Muslim women on a daily basis are Islamophobia, particularly around hijab and niqab, discrimination due to race, faith and gender, particularly when going for interviews for jobs."

ACTION POINTS
The government needs to promote:
• Strict observance of the 2010 Equalities Act which legislates against discrimination on religious grounds, particularly in statutory agencies, elected offices and public services.
• Tolerance of all dress codes (including headscarves and face veil).
• Flexibility regarding provision of religious needs in the workplace (for example, concerning prayer and diet).
• Flexibility regarding provision of religiously appropriate services at local authority level.

Patriarchal Structures and Attitudes

The prevalence of rigid patriarchal structures and attitudes within Muslim families and communities was raised. The women felt they were locked into mostly traditional feminine roles (carers of immediate and extended family and home) with little opportunity to occupy other less traditional roles in the public sphere.

There were tremendous expectations of women to make successful marriages and raise strong families based on principles deemed Islamic by male members of their family and community. Often, where women fell short of expectations of marriage and family responsibility, they could be seen as a threat to the family and community's Muslim identity.

It was argued that the unremitting pressure of 'getting things right' or as another woman put it, 'being expected to magically manage everything and be an all rounder,' meant having little time or energy for oneself and leading a balanced life within and outside the home / family. This frequently led to depression and mental health problems among women, relationship breakdown and divorce, all of which were seen as a repudiation of the 'Islamic' principles created and espoused by male family and community members in particular.

It was recognised that, what was dressed up by community patriarchs as an 'Islamic' identity or principles and then applied to marriage and family was in fact based on ethno-cultural beliefs and traditions. However, challenging extreme patriarchal attitudes could also lead to domestic violence.

ACTION POINTS

Much work needs to be done in Muslim communities and mosques have an important role to play:

- They should permit women to participate fully and equally with men in running mosques and related bodies.
- They should encourage Islamic scholarly education and training of women in order to allow for a plurality of Quranic interpretations.
- They should break taboos around the problems of domestic violence, child abuse, drugs, alcohol misuse.

Impact of Government Spending Cuts

There was an awareness of the actual impact of declining public funds and the cutbacks in public service provision and this were seen as a major issue for Muslim women, who form part of some of Britain's most socio-economically disadvantaged communities. There was a fear that current and further public sector cuts would undermine the important groundwork done in local communities by voluntary sector organisations.

The two main areas of concern were:

- Support mechanisms for Muslim women to gain confidence in undertaking employment, further/higher education, being active in civic and political life etc, are at risk of being dismantled.

- Anger and anxiety was expressed at the possibility of taking away support and help for the most vulnerable women that included those:
  - suffering from domestic violence;
  - fleeing forced marriages;
  - living below the poverty line;
  - brides from abroad who endure difficult marriages, have an insecure immigration status and are isolated because they speak little or no English.

"Who will look after, teach, develop and supports my children while I'm active in civic life? At this stage in life, education and developing my children to become active and positive citizens is most important. You'd need to give me more time, or pay me - I also work part-time."

Women wanted the government to know that they cannot rely on women being 'changers of society' through sheer good will. Even if good will continued, those already at the front-line of providing services (voluntarily) that should really be within the government's remit, were constrained by time.

ACTION POINTS

The government should:
- Find innovative ways of supporting grassroots women's organisations if they are serious about 'Big Society.'
- Carry out a gender equality impact assessment of its programme of public funding cuts.
- Review it decisions to dismantle certain funding schemes that support Muslim women.
- Consider increasing the funding available to organisations serving women from Muslim communities for training / education and local support services, particularly in the areas of mental health, family and community safety, education and civic / political participation.

Government Policies Impacting on Muslim Communities

It was agreed that by and large there was little trust in government due to the attitudes of political decision makers towards Muslim women and communities generally and policies that reflected such attitudes. The debate started by Jack Straw over the face-veil or niqab, in 2006, can be seen as representative of politicians' disregard for the impact that their statements can have on public opinion and ultimately on the safety of Muslim women and their families.
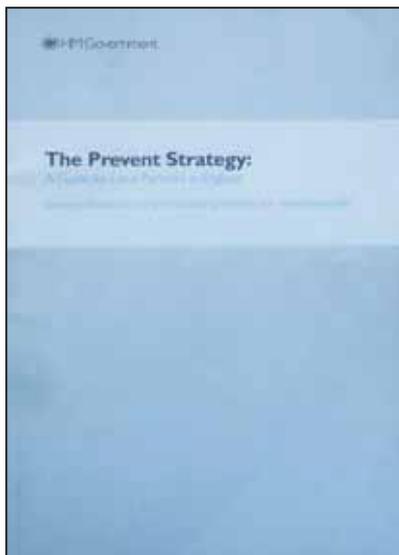
It was felt that even after the events of London 7/7 (2005), when the Blair government realised the importance of dialoguing with Muslim women and decided, for the first time, to engage with them through a publicly-funded programme. This engagement took place through the prism of extremism.

The women questioned why 'preventing violent extremism' formed the sole basis for the government on which Muslim women could be invited into the civic and political arenas. A number of the round-table participants and email respondents felt that Muslim women in Britain have accumulated valuable social capital despite the general lack of resources and could have been invited to play a useful part in any number of social, cultural, economic and political initiatives and programmes. The association with a programme that has failed and now viewed as a political mistake, has stigmatized Muslim women's groups.

ACTION POINTS
The government should:
- Make a disconnection between Islam, Muslims and violent extremism.
- Use positive terms and images relating to Islam and Muslims in policy speeches, literature, and all communication through popular media.

Paths to Involvement in Civic and Political Life

Despite the barriers to involvement in civic and political life, the majority of the participants felt that compared with 20 years ago significant progress had taken place and that the situation of Muslim and black and ethnic minority women generally had improved vastly.

Shabana Mahmood
Labour MP

Baroness Haleh Afshar
Cross-bench Peer

**Baroness
Sayeeda Warsi**
Conservative Cabinet
Minister

It was noted that more Muslim women are visible today in education, employment and other areas of public life than was the case two decades ago. It was argued that this fact should be acknowledged and celebrated more often in order to encourage their daughters to go further and break through the various glass ceilings and bottlenecks in employment, education and politics, that persist. It is of utmost importance, therefore, that existing role models are promoted and women support other women at local and national levels to make in-roads into sites of political decision making.

The discussion revolved around what had worked well in allowing ordinary Muslim women to get on the first few rungs of the civic action/political participation ladder. From their own experiences, three main facilitators or motivators were identified:

• Desire for change (in communities and society)
• Support (of family and community)
• Islam

Apart from these, other factors also mentioned included: financial security to be able to volunteer in organisations or spend time in political activity, and having the confidence to speak out in public.

Desire for Change

An interest in party politics was not a considered priority. However, having a commitment to one's community and wanting to contribute to change society for the better was seen as a crucial element in becoming engaged in civic and political activity and action. For many women the need for positive change (that is equal rights and opportunities for all regardless of sex, race/ethnicity, religion etc; justice for all), stemmed from an intense desire to make a better world for their children. if they became beneficiaries of their action for change then that was almost a bonus.

"The need for justice and equality ... I have an interest. I want to ensure my daughter grows up participating in life in the fullest sense and being aware of politics and the change she can possibly make."

It was agreed that without being able to appeal to people's basic interest in improving society, it would be impossible to mobilise them around important social, economic and political issues.

Support

There are Muslim women who are prepared to speak out and to stand for public office, if only they had the support. Although Muslim women had to be prepared to push for change themselves within communities and society, they can only be effective if they are supported by community leaders, local and national government departments.

Another important facilitator for the women who were engaged in civic and political participation was the support they had received from family and community. Without such encouragement, the most civic-minded and politically motivated of women with children would find it impossible to devote time to active citizenship.
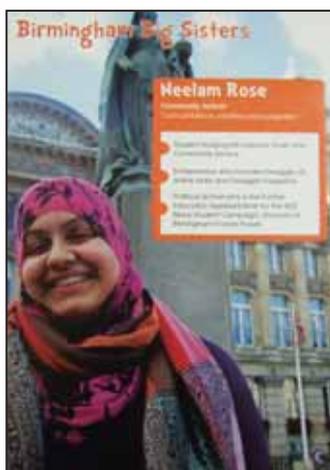
Islam

Women's Islamic faith was another very important driving factor influencing engagement in civic and political life. It was felt that significant numbers of Muslims were motivated by their religion. For many, the concept of jihad, according to its original Qur'anic meaning, meant striving for self-improvement and hence the struggle for positive change in one's community.

"A strong ethic of voluntary work, an inclusive vision of Islam, an ethic of contributing positively and peacefully to the society in which you live, taking [from Islam] that which serves me and my culture well and leaving aside (but not outwardly and publicly condemning it) that which does not."

ACTION POINTS
What is needed?
- Funding for training opportunities, through local authorities, voluntary sector organisations, national outreach services and citizenship training in schools, in how to become actively engaged in civic and political life at local and national level.
- Funding for 'role model' and mentoring programmes, especially for young Muslim women who are keen to participate in public life.
- Funding for training for women in marketable employment skills.
- Funding to facilitate Muslim women's participation in the above mentioned training and mentoring schemes – namely to cover crèche/child care costs.

School Governor - Hina Nathalia

"I work part time in Recruitment and Selection at the City Council. After volunteering at my children's primary school, I wanted to become more involved. I have been a governor for five years. My recruitment skills were useful when I was involved in appointing a new headteacher.

I am also now an elected school governor for the secondary school my children started in 2010. I want to be a school governor as long as I can so I can give back to the institutions that have contributed to my children's education. I now have a better understanding of the education system and have gained skills in finance, personnel, and strategic planning."

Hina Nathalia *School Governor, Leicester.*

"A rewarding way of making an important contribution to education while developing your existing skills and learning new ones."

Requirements for a school governor
- You need to be over 18
- No specialist qualifications are needed
- Enthusiasm, commitment and an interest in education
- A family member does not have to be attending the school

What is involved?
Governors work on a voluntary basis – they do not get paid and can expect to spend at least 6 - 8 hours a month on duties. Governors are members of a school's Governing Body that provide strategic management which includes setting the strategic direction; setting and managing the budget; appointing staff; and raising school standards.

How to become a school governor
If you want to become school governor:
- contact your school
- contact your local authority
- fill in the application form on the School Governors' One Stop Shop (SGOSS) website (www.sgoss.org.uk) - for England only
- contact Association of Muslim Governors (www.muslimgovernors.org)

Further Information: Search for 'volunteering as a school or college governor' on the UK government website www.direct.gov.uk

Special Police Constable - Sabbah Wasim

"Although I work for Regional Customer Services, ATS Euromaster, I have also been working in a voluntary capacity as a special police constable since 2004. Initially I was in the Neighbourhood Team dealing with local community based issues such as community engagement events, election day patrols and school visits. However, I am now on a Response Team dealing with frontline emergency 999 calls such as domestic violence, rubbery, burglary and assault calls.

Being a special provides personal satisfaction as I am giving something back to the community. The police motto is to 'serve our communities and make them feel safer' - and it is great to know that I am part of that."

Sabbah Wasim *Special Police Constable, West Midlands.*

Requirements for a special constable
- You need to be over 18
- No specialist qualifications are needed
- Must be fit and in good health
- Be able to commit a minimum of four hours a week

What is involved?
Specials are volunteers, and do not receive pay for their work and are required to commit 16 hours per month. Once trained, Specials work along side regular police officers and assisting and supporting them in their duties. They perform numerous important policing tasks such as: conducting foot patrols; teaching local school students about safety,; tackling anti-social activity; carrying out house-to-house enquiries; providing security at major events; presenting evidence in court; and assisting at scenes of accidents, fights or fires.

"The training and experiences that you will encounter will bring challenges and also personal development."

How to become a special constable
If you want to become a special:
- contact your local police force
- visit the 'Police Recruitment' website: http://policerecruitment.homeoffice.gov.uk

Further information: *Visit the following website: www.policespecials.com*

Councillor - Rabia Bhatti

"I have just finished studying Law, Philosophy and Psychology and when I was elected recently (May 2011), at the age of only 20, I became one of the youngest councillors in the UK. I am already busy attending council, committee and group meetings; going out and speaking to my ward members; visiting sites of planning applications; and reply to emails from residents about their issues. I put myself forward because I wanted to show others, regardless of age and background, not to be afraid to take a public stand for what you believe in.

Currently I am also the First President of Aylesbury College, the youngest Governor in the whole of Buckinghamshire at the time of my appointment and I am also an executive member of the Chiltern Racial and Equality council."

Rabia Bhatti *Conservative Councillor for Newtown Ward, Chesham, Buckinghamshire.*

"Make a real difference to the lives of others by championing injustice and eradicating inefficiencies."

Requirements for a councillor
- You need to be over 18
- No specialist or formal qualifications are needed
- Are British, or a citizen of the Commonwealth or the European Union
- Are registered to vote in the area or if you have lived, worked or owned property there for at least 12 months before an election
- Are not working for the council you want to be a councillor for

What is involved?
Councillors do not receive a salary but are paid a 'member's allowance' in recognition of the time and expenses incurred while on council business. Councillors are people who are elected to the local council to represent their local community. A person can stand for election as an independent candidate or as a group / party political candidate. Councils can be responsible for a range of services such as: planning, education, housing, social services, community safety, crime reduction, waste collection, etc. Councillors have to therefore balance the needs and interests of residents, their political party (if any) and the council.

The councillor's role and responsibilities include:

- representing the ward for which they are elected
- decision-making
- developing and reviewing council policy
- scrutinising the decisions taken by the councillors on the executive or cabinet
- regulatory, quasi-judicial, and statutory duties
- community leadership and engagement

Time Commitment

The time commitment can range from between 5 and 20 hours a week. Your role within the council would determine just how much time you should be prepared to give to being a councilor. By law if you are working, your employer must allow you to take a reasonable amount of time off during working hours to perform your duties as a councillor. The amount of time off will depend on your responsibilities and the effect of your absence on your employer's business. However, it is best to speak with your employer before making any commitments.

How to become a councilor

Operation Black Vote, run 'councillor shadowing schemes,' to find out if they are running one with your local council, visit their website: www.obv.org.uk.

> Under 3% of the UK's 100,000 councillors are from a Black and other minority ethnic (BME) background. BME groups make up nearly 10% of the population.

If you want to represent a political party then the next step would be for you to get involved with your party locally. The three largest parties have councillors' associations. You can find out more from their websites:

- Conservative Councillors Association
  www.conservativecouncillors.com
- Association of Labour Councillors
  www.labouronline.org/councillors
- Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors
  www.aldc.org
- The Local Government Association Independent Group
  www.independentgroup.lga.gov.uk

> **Further information:** For more information on your local council and election arrangements there contact the Electoral Commission: www.electoralcommission.org.uk For further information and list of useful publications visit www.beacouncillor.org.uk

Magistrate - Naseem Aslam

"Despite going through a forced marriage and being a single parent, I always wanted to study and have a career. I persevered and now work for local government in Community Safety, obtained my MBA in 2009 and applied to become a magistrate because I wanted to contribute to upholding the law and making the community a safer place.

I was sworn in as a Justice of the Peace in November 2009 to the Wakefield Bench. My duties include: determining whether a defendant is guilty or not and passing the appropriate sentence; deciding on applications for bail; and sending more serious cases to Crown Court. Now my future aspirations include getting involved in politics."

Naseem Aslam *Magistrate.*

"It is a big responsibility as you are dealing with people's lives and futures."

Requirements for a magistrate
- You need to be between 18 and 70
- A legal qualification is not required but you must be willing to undergo training
- You must be able to commit a minimum of 26 half days a year

What is involved?
Magistrates, also known as Justices of the Peace or JPs, are not paid and are volunteers who hear 95% of criminal cases in England and Wales. They sit as one of a bench of three magistrates and deal with less serious criminal cases such as minor theft, criminal damage, public disorder and motoring offences. As Magistrates' courts don't use juries, the magistrates listen to the evidence, decide if the person is guilty and decide on a punishment. Magistrates are given training, have the benefit of a legal adviser in court, use sentencing guidelines, and use case law to assist them with their decisions. Magistrates also decide on civil matters such as family issues such as child custody etc.

Justices of the Peace in Scotland
The criminal justice system in Scotland is separate from the system in England and Wales. In Scotland, Justices of the Peace perform a similar role to magistrates in England and Wales.

How to become a magistrate
If you want to become a magistrate:
- contact your local magistrate court
- contact Operation Black Vote who run a magistrate shadowing scheme: www.obv.org.uk

Further information: Search for 'volunteering as a magistrate' on the UK government website www.direct.gov.uk

Public Appointments

What are public appointments?

A public appointment is an appointment to the board of a public body or to a government committee. There are over 1,200 public bodies across the UK delivering important and essential public services. Around 18,500 people hold a public appointment and it is a great way to raise your profile and enhance your reputation. Some positions are paid while others are voluntary.

What does a public appointee do?

The roles of public appointees vary but all are required to provide leadership, strategic direction, independent scrutiny and, in some cases, specialist expertise in important areas of public life. Key responsibilities may include agreeing strategy, overseeing performance targets, ensuring the finances of the organisation are managed properly and ensuring the organisation works in the public interest.

Who can apply for public appointments?

The skills and experience needed vary from post to post but, in general, you will need to show you:

• are committed and can devote the time to the work of the body

• have the courage to ask questions and challenge

• are confident and will speak up and express your point of view

• are able to assess the impact of decisions on all sections of the community

• can influence the actions and decision-making of a formal board or committee

• can thinking clearly to assess a situation quickly, accurately and objectively

Although the government is committed to diversity, currently women, members of ethnic minorities and the disabled are under-represented on public bodies.

How to apply for public appointments?

This following website provides details of current vacancies on the boards of public bodies and on a range of Government committees around the UK. (A search can be carried out for vacancies specifically for England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland).

http://publicappointments.cabinetoffice.gov.uk

PUBLIC BODIES

Although the Cabinet Office publishes a list of public bodies annually, some examples include:

• health authorities, NHS trusts and primary care trusts

• national museums and galleries

• key regulatory bodies

• expert advisory bodies

• a number of specialist scientific and technical committees

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