

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

The content of this ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the Official Report (Hansard) process.

Regional Development

DIVERSITY IN PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS

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Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): I believe that the boards in place operate very effectively but I am concerned that the membership of the boards of the five bodies for which I am responsible – Northern Ireland Water (NIW); Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHC); Belfast Harbour Commissioners; Londonderry Port and Harbour Commissioners; and Warrenpoint Harbour Authority – are not as representative of wider society as I would like them to be. Partly as a result of legacy issues, there are only seven women currently on these boards, out of 42 non executive positions, and very few younger people, people with a disability or people from an ethnic minority.

The services provided by these boards are relevant to all of the people in Northern Ireland and I would like to see them reflect more closely the makeup of the society which they represent.

I have reviewed the report by the Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland, published in January 2014. The report highlights the widespread nature of this problem and makes a number of recommendations for change covering policy, strategy and process. I am also aware of work carried out by Cabinet Office on diversity in public appointments.

My officials are represented on the cross-departmental public appointments forum which has been considering the range of measures highlighted by the Commissioner to attract a wider range of applicants to appointment competitions. I have asked them to take all possible measures to improve the diversity of the boards to which I make appointments by making public appointments more attractive and accessible.

I will of course continue to make public appointments based on merit and in accordance with the Commissioner for Public Appointments Code of Practice. However, in future, the aim will be to build teams with the best mix of skills and experience rather than fill individual slots on boards. To make such teams as diverse as possible, I also intend to move away from what has become almost automatic reappointment of members for second terms. This will allow fresh candidates to apply for all appointment opportunities and it will help me to deal with historic succession planning issues arising from the timing of many appointments. Members who have completed their first terms will, of course, remain eligible to apply for a second term through public competition where they will be assessed in the same way as all other applicants.

In order to give boards notice and space to plan ahead, and to give my officials time to raise awareness of appointments through outreach measures and to make the recruitment process as accessible and attractive as possible, the policy on reappointments will take effect from 1 April 2015. First term appointments falling due in the interim will be extended as necessary for periods between two and 12 months. Future appointments to NIW will be for 4 years to bring them into line with my other bodies.

These proposals have been discussed with the Commissioner for Public Appointments who has expressed support for them.