

Case Study

Establishing an apprentice scheme

How the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) created an apprentice scheme to aid the professional development of diverse aspiring non-executive directors (NEDs)

DBS, chaired by Dr Gillian Fairfield, is responsible for helping employers make safer recruitment decisions.

DBS has established a rolling apprenticeship scheme to enable aspiring NEDs to gain boardroom experience. With a small board of six members, at any time the DBS also has two apprentices joining board and committee meetings.

The opportunity

DBS sought to improve the ethnic diversity of its board, to bring a wider range of perspectives into boardroom discussions.

All DBS board members are appointed by the Secretary of State at the Home Office. Establishing an apprentice scheme enabled individuals with less exposure to boardroom situations to gain experience of how a public board operates.

The action

DBS worked with two organisations, Black on Board and Boardroom Apprentice, to enable aspiring NEDs to join board meetings for between six and twelve months. Apprentices from both organisations typically had prior leadership experience, which was supplemented by training on matters such as the role of the board, how boardrooms operate and public sector governance.

DBS met with candidates from Black on Board before confirming their position on the scheme. Those coming from Boardroom Apprentice were allocated a place by the organisers of the programme.

Each apprentice is given a 'buddy' on the board, typically the chair, to meet with regularly before board meetings to discuss the papers and their proposed contribution.

The outcome

DBS currently has a rolling programme of apprentices, who play an active role in contributing to board and committee meetings. Discussions have benefited from the addition of diverse perspectives and lived experience.

Apprentices from the scheme have gone on to join boards such as Barnardos' Northern Ireland National Advisory Board, citing their experience as a DBS apprentice as a key contributor to their onward success. Another has joined the DBS as an associate member of the board.



Watchpoints

Chairs who adopt this approach will need to be mindful of the additional administrative effort needed to run the scheme. Apprentices will require a full induction, security clearance and access to IT equipment.

Chairs may need to consider time requirements after the programme concludes, to ensure continued support for apprentices while applying for board positions.

To establish an apprentice scheme, it will be important for chairs to work closely with their relevant sponsoring department to ensure that they are well informed on the programme and agree the distinction between the status of non-executive directors and apprentices. Apprentices are not members of the board and do not have the same roles or responsibilities as public appointees.

Find out more

Diversity in Public Appointments (DiPA) was a research project conducted during 2022 – 2023, involving contributors from across public service, including members of the House of Lords, senior civil servants, public body chairs, and diversity experts.

The research generated insight, guidance and case studies, for public body chairs to shape an inclusive recruitment process is freely available online PCF | (publicchairsforum.org.uk).

To share your experiences or contribute a case study please contact secretariat@publicchairsforum.org.uk.