

## **Influencing Our World – Getting Women onto Public Bodies.**

Lucia Windsor Room, Newnham College, Cambridge. Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2009.

**Cambridge AWiSE**, the Women's Network at the University of Cambridge and the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology held a joint meeting at Newnham College on Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2009. This meeting provided information on Public Bodies, how to apply for vacancies and an opportunity to hear from women who are already involved in community activities, in local government or on a public body

**Chair – Dr. Esther Haines, Equality and Diversity, University of Cambridge.**

**Rachel Tobbell, UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology ([www.ukrc4setwomen.org](http://www.ukrc4setwomen.org))**

*The UKRC for Women in SET works to significantly improve the participation and position of women in science, engineering and technology occupations in industry, research, academia and public service to benefit the future productivity of the UK and the lifetime earnings and career aspirations of women*

One excellent way of developing a range of skills and experience that can help women in their career is to join the board of a Non Departmental Public Body (NDPB). There are over 1000 public bodies in Britain and the government is keen to improve the gender balance of their boards. Clearly, it is very important that women are fairly represented on these boards so that policy decisions taken and advice given to the government fairly reflects the views of women as well as men.

There is a wide variety of NDPBs working across all sectors of science, engineering and technology. Some make decisions, control budgets, and recommend policy, while others primarily give advice. Some work at very senior, national levels and others have more local or specific remits.

Serving on the board of a NDPB can bring the following benefits:

1. It can help develop and demonstrate a range of managerial skills, such as processing information, decision-making, developing and implementing strategy
2. It can help you make new contacts
3. It can provide a new interest and outlet for skills and knowledge you already possess
4. It enables you to influence decisions and policy in an area of interest.

The UKRC is working with government in their aim to have 40% female representation on SET public bodies by 2008. The overall representation of women on public bodies was 26% in 2008. In order to encourage more women to apply for public body membership the UKRC offer the following support:

- Seminars to raise awareness about public boards and the opportunities available to women such as this meeting.



- A mentoring programme to help with the application process.
- Good practice guides – see:  
<http://www.ukrc4setwomen.org/html/resources/ukrc-publications/>
- GetSETWomen – the UKRC database of women in SET – which helps women increase their own visibility and provides information on Public Body vacancies. For more information visit::  
<http://www.ukrc4setwomen.org/html/getset-women-database/>
- Information through the UKRC website.

Appointments are made on merit and involve an independent assessor who may not have a SET background. It is important, therefore, that your application is clear, doesn't use scientific jargon and is easy to understand. Core competencies include strategic thinking skills, an ability to give dispassionate advice, good problem solving skills and an appreciation of public sector values. The UKRC have a good practice guide covering how to fill in an application form (see: <http://www.ukrc4setwomen.org/html/resources/ukrc-publications/>) and can offer individual help to women applying for public body membership.

The application procedure involved filling in a competence based application form. In this you will need to give examples for each of the criteria needed for the position. It is very important never combine any of the selection criteria and include just one example; the first round of the application process will probably include a check list which you have to fulfil before moving to the next stage. It is worth applying for a position even if you don't meet all the desirable criteria and it is extremely important to research the public body and role before you start.

The UKRC best advice is start a **personal skills and knowledge audit** to keep a record as you progress in your career. This should include information on where and when you have acquired your new skills and knowledge and an example. Think broadly, not just work, include voluntary work etc.

A good way of doing this is through a CAR analysis:

C - context – give a brief description

A - action – out line specific actions you took

R - result – describe the outcome.

See <http://www.publicappts-vacs.gov.uk/> and <http://www.appointments.org.uk/> for details of current vacancies.

### **Guest Speaker**

#### **Dr. Sophie Rocks Centre Manager The Risk Centre, Cranfield University**

Sophie is a toxicologist with a background in materials science. She has a wide research portfolio including risk assessment, materials characterisation and free radical toxicology. Her particular interest is in the manufacture, use and risk of engineered nano-materials. Sophie was appointed in September 2008 as a member of the Advisory Committee on Hazardous Substances (ACHS):

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/chemicals/achs/>



Her motivation for applying included “curiosity, doing something I had not done before, a chance to give something back, an opportunity to promote my work and my organisation, to network and to get credit and a higher profile within my own institution.” Sophie finds being on a public body very interesting and believes being on a public body will have both short and longer-term benefits for her. In the short term the benefits include the opportunities to network, a chance to develop new communication skills and to gain valuable experience. In the longer term being on a public body will, she believes, develop her personal reputation, the reputation of the organisation she works for and for the committee itself. She finds being part of a public body which focuses the scientific direction of the UK incredibly rewarding and has learnt a lot about what drives science within the UK and encouraged other young women to apply.

We were very lucky also to hear short talks by three other women who volunteer their time for community organisations and local government. **Miriam Lynn** spoke about her political up bringing which led her to stand as a Cambridge City Councillor. Her enthusiasm and belief in the importance of this role was evident in her talk. **Liz Hide** works for University Museums and is Chair of the Trustees of Cambridge Women’s Resource Centre. CWRC is a not-for-profit organisation which has been in existence for over 25 years and provides support and vocational training for women in Cambridge. Liz gains great satisfaction from putting something back and working for a cause she very strongly believes in. She also finds that, although the CWRC is not related to her own work, she has gained skills that are very useful in the workplace, particularly negotiation skills! **Sigrd Fisher**, Head of Equality and Diversity at the University of Cambridge spoke about her role on the City Council Equalities Panel. Her presentation made it very clear how few women really influence our world. She asked “why can’t we speak for ourselves?” posed the following questions:

- What opportunities are there?
- How much can you do?
- Are there any barriers to overcome?
- Do you know how things work, can you get support and advice?
- Do you believe you have something to offer.

We hope that this meeting provided information on public boards, answered some of the questions posed here and encouraged you to get more involved in public life.

We would also like to thank the Women’s National Commission <http://www.thewnc.org.uk/> for providing copies of their Women in Public Life Guide 2009.

**Cambridge Association for Women in Science and Engineering**  
**[www.camawise.org.uk](http://www.camawise.org.uk)**

