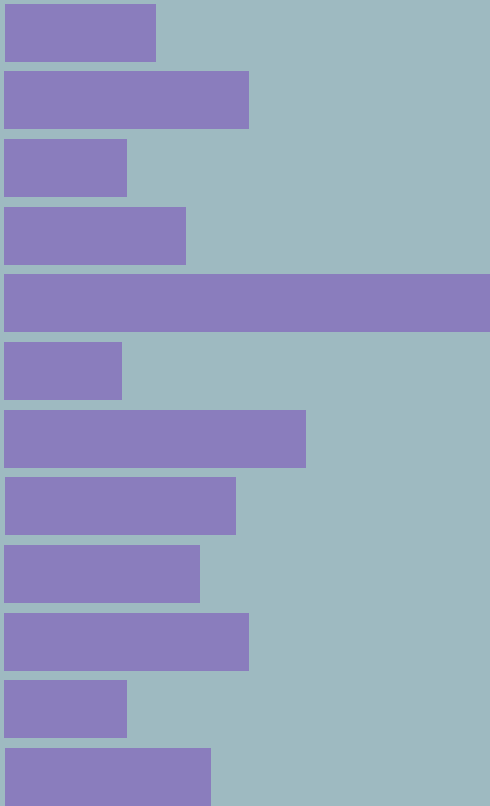GatenbySanderson survey in association with The Seacole Group

# Understanding Representation and Retention in NHS NED Roles

# Background

The importance and value of ensuring representation from different societal groups and reflecting the diverse base and communities served by Trusts and other National Health Service (NHS) organisations is essential.

"Feeling heard is important, appreciating this is important and I think executive members could be more visibly vocal about what they want more or less of so as to extract the best value from NEDs."

The NHS Long Term People Plan emphasises the importance of diversity at the board level, including how diverse boards contribute to better decision-making for the communities they serve, which in turn improves patient care and overall organisational performance.

As described in the NHS England (NHSE) Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Improvement Plan published in 2023, promoting diversity in leadership roles within the NHS is a key priority and objective for all NHS organisations including one of the six high impact actions for trusts, being that chairs, CEOs, and board members must have specific and measurable EDI objectives to which they will be individually and collectively accountable.

# Introduction

The new Labour government has also placed a significant emphasis on improving EDI within the NHS, a stance built on recognition of the critical role that a diverse and inclusive workforce, at all levels, plays in delivering high-quality patient care and addressing health disparities. Indeed, in their commitment to EDI, new sanctions and additional oversight on those organisations not setting clear targets and/or regularly reviewing progress, and meeting these, are likely to be forthcoming.

As the leading provider of search, selection, and talent consultancy services to the public sector, GatenbySanderson's (GS) specialist partners and consultants advise, guide, and support the successful recruitment of hundreds of executive and non-executive placements every year, and help organisations to successfully maintain a healthy, inclusive, and relevant board. At GS, EDI are similarly key areas of focus of our work, in helping to address the imbalance of representation in senior appointments.

"We need a stronger tone at the top being set with actions and monitoring to ensure there is an impact."

From the many conversations our Health Team has each year, disappointingly we have received feedback that some diverse NHS non-executives are considering leaving either before, or at the end of their term, and further, would not recommend their network to consider such roles.

This disappointing intelligence is worrying for the future recruitment and retention of diverse non-executives. As such, we partnered with The Seacole Group and conducted a survey specifically designed to gather quantitative and qualitative data, to determine whether what we were hearing anecdotally, was a true reflection of Black, Asian and Ethnic Minorities (BAE) non-executives views, to what extent, and what actions should be taken to improve retention.

**Dr Melanie West**
**Senior Consultant, Health**
melanie.west@gatenbysanderson.com

"Associate NEDs are often overlooked if they are BAME."

# Objectives and methodology

> " I see little change in the recruitment practices overall that encourages diversity of thought."

The importance of gathering and sharing data to both underpin change as well as to make the case for it, was the key driver to undertaking this survey. Our key purpose therefore was to gain insights directly from ethnic minority NED colleagues, and share this to the wider NHS, in order to help in not only continuing to attract but also critically to retain diverse colleagues for the future NHS.

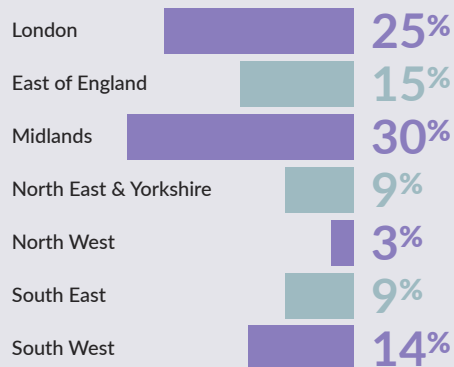In summary, the aim of the survey was threefold:

- substantiate the anecdotal feedback GS were receiving, specifically from ethnic minority NEDs
- identify and understand ethnic minority NEDs direct personal experiences
- use the insights provided from respondents to provide suggestions to improve recruitment and retention of ethnic minority NEDs.

## Methodology

We surveyed the Seacole Group membership (circa 180) with a short series of questions to provide both:

- quantitative insights through answering questions requiring a YES or NO answer
- qualitative insights via open-ended questions giving the opportunity for responders to freely share opinions, experiences, and suggestions for improvement.

**% respondents by NHS regional location**

| Region | % |
|---|---|
| London | 25% |
| East of England | 15% |
| Midlands | 30% |
| North East & Yorkshire | 9% |
| North West | 3% |
| South East | 9% |
| South West | 14% |

# Data analysis: key insights

The survey data presents an intriguing and multifaceted picture of the current state of diversity and inclusion among ethnic minority NHS NEDs. With responses from 58 Seacole Members, the survey provides valuable insights into both the strengths and challenges faced by these individuals and boards.
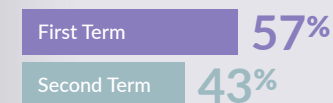
This analysis delves into the key findings, shedding light on areas of success and highlighting critical opportunities for improvement. All results are referenced throughout the following text.

Each figure relates to the specific question asked in the survey.
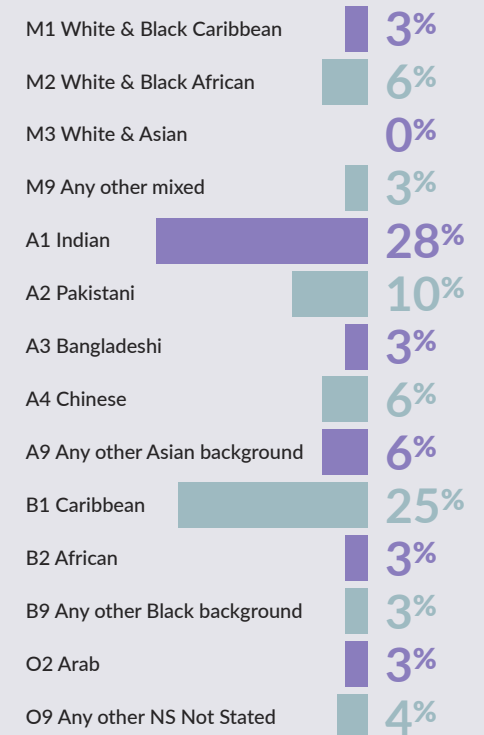
## Demographic overview

The demographic breakdown of the respondents reveals a promising mix of experience levels, with 57% of participants in their first term and 43% in their second term. This distribution indicates a blend of fresh perspectives and seasoned insights within boards, which is essential for fostering dynamic and effective governance.

**Ethnicity profile of respondents**

| Ethnicity | % |
|---|---|
| M1 White & Black Caribbean | 3% |
| M2 White & Black African | 6% |
| M3 White & Asian | 0% |
| M9 Any other mixed | 3% |
| A1 Indian | 28% |
| A2 Pakistani | 10% |
| A3 Bangladeshi | 3% |
| A4 Chinese | 6% |
| A9 Any other Asian background | 6% |
| B1 Caribbean | 25% |
| B2 African | 3% |
| B9 Any other Black background | 3% |
| O2 Arab | 3% |
| O9 Any other NS Not Stated | 4% |

**% respondents in their First or Second term**

| Term | % |
|---|---|
| First Term | 57% |
| Second Term | 43% |

## Confidence in voicing opinions

# "Feeling heard is important."

One of the most encouraging statistics from the survey is that an impressive 97% of respondents feel confident in voicing contrary opinions during meetings. This level of confidence suggests that most NEDs feel empowered to contribute diverse viewpoints - crucial for robust decision-making. However, this statistic also raises an important question: does this confidence reflect a genuinely supportive environment, or does it stem from the inherent resilience and fortitude of diverse candidates who are determined to be heard despite potential barriers?

**% respondents who feel confident voicing a contrary opinion in a meeting**

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | **97%** |
| No | **3%** |

## Cultural and social comfort

85% of respondents report feeling comfortable discussing their social and cultural backgrounds in the boardroom. This level of comfort is vital for fostering an inclusive environment where all members feel valued and understood. Additionally, 84% of respondents believe their organisations are transparent about the work needed in diversity and inclusion, which is a positive indicator of a commitment to ongoing improvement. Equally significant is that 85% feel their boards are ready to embrace more visible ethnic diversity, suggesting a readiness to reflect the broader society within the boardroom.
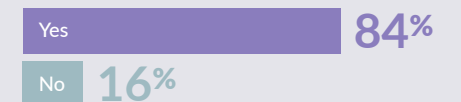
**% respondents who feel comfortable talking about their social and cultural background in the board room**
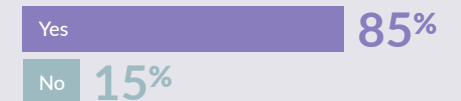
| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | **85%** |
| No | **15%** |
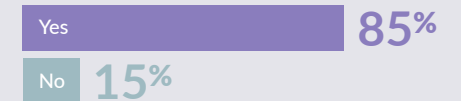
**% respondents who feel valued as much as their fellow NEDs**

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | **85%** |
| No | **15%** |
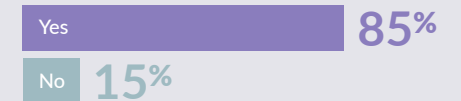
**% respondents who say their organisation is honest about the work needed in diversity and inclusion**

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | **84%** |
| No | **16%** |

**% respondents who think their board is ready for more visible ethnic diversity**

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | **85%** |
| No | **15%** |

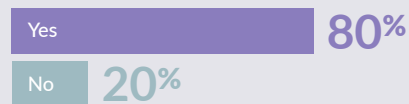## Effectiveness in promoting diversity and inclusion

75% of respondents reported their trust as having an inclusive approach to policy creation and/or making major decisions, and 80% have been asked to chair a committee.

However, despite these, and the positive indicators reported in the previous sections, there are areas of concern - notably, only 72% of respondents believe their board is effective in actively promoting diversity and inclusion. This means that above one quarter of those surveyed – 28% – feel that their board is not adequately addressing these critical issues. This statistic highlights the need for more effective strategies and actions to promote diversity and inclusion within NHS boards and organisations.
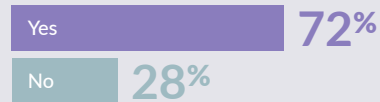
**% respondents who say their Trust has an inclusive approach when it comes to creating new policies and making major decisions**

Yes **75%**
No **25%**
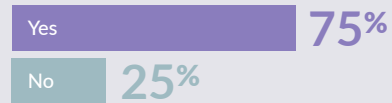
**% respondents asked to chair a committee**

Yes **80%**
No **20%**

**% respondents describing their board as effective in promoting diversity and inclusion**

Yes **72%**
No **28%**

## Incidents of discrimination and microaggressions

The revelation that 43% of respondents have witnessed or experienced discrimination, harassment, or biased behaviour in their roles as NHS NEDs is also very troubling. This statistic underscores the persistence of significant cultural issues within boardrooms. Furthermore, 44% of respondents have encountered microaggressions or repeated subtle challenges. These experiences can have a profound impact on individuals, eroding their confidence and sense of belonging, and affect their performance and commitment – and willingness to stay longer term.

" I am not always confident that the impact for protected groups and on health inequalities is understood or fully considered when decisions are made."

**% respondents who have witnessed or experienced discrimination, harassment, or biased behaviour in their role as an NHS NED**

Yes **43%**
No **57%**

**% respondents who have experienced instances of microaggressions or repeated subtle challenges in their role as an NED**

Yes **44%**
No **56%**

"The system needs to fundamentally change."

# Feedback mechanisms and responsive actions

On a more positive note, 70% of respondents report that effective feedback mechanisms are in place for NEDs to report issues related to diversity and inclusion.

Similarly, 72% believe that their organisations take responsive actions when issues of bias and discrimination are raised. These figures indicate that many organisations are making efforts to address issues proactively. However, the fact that nearly one third of respondents do not share this view is concerning and suggests there are significant gaps in how these mechanisms are perceived or implemented across different boards.

**% respondents who say there are effective feedback mechanisms in place for NHS NEDs to report issues relating to diversity and inclusion**

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 70% |
| No | 30% |
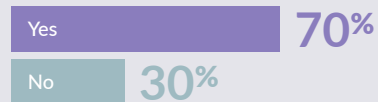
**% respondents who say responsive actions are taken as a result of issues being raised in relation to bias and discrimination**

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 72% |
| No | 28% |
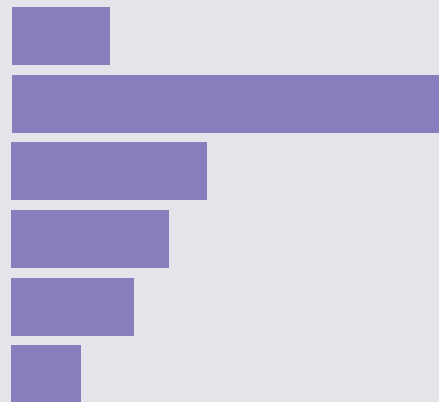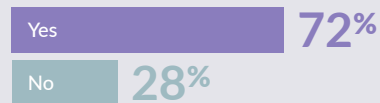
"BAME colleagues are overlooked."

# Retention

One of the most alarming findings from the survey is that 25% of all respondents are unlikely to seek another NED role in the NHS once their current term ends. The average attrition rate of board members leaving their role before the end of their tenure in the UK is not straightforwardly documented in public sources. However, turnover rates among senior executives, including board members, can be estimated based on general employee turnover data. The average turnover rate across all sectors was around 16.8% in 2023 (Source: UK Money), but it must be remembered that overall employee turnover rates vary significantly by industry.

**% respondents who are likely to stay or find another NED role in the NHS once their current term ends**

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 75% |
| No | 25% |
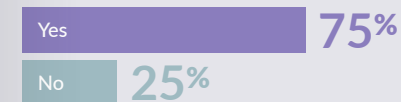
"The system needs to fundamentally change or more people will keep leaving."

Further, turnover rates among senior roles like board members are generally lower due to the stability and strategic nature of their positions. However, exact figures for board members specifically are harder to find, but executive turnover, which might serve as a proxy, tends to be lower than the general workforce turnover rate, hovering between 10-15% annually (Source: UK Money; this data encompasses public and private sectors). That 25% of the respondents are intending to leave the NHS is a stark reminder of the potential loss of valuable talent and diverse perspectives if the issues of discrimination, harassment, and lack of effective support are not adequately and immediately addressed to ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of population relevant, NHS boards.

# Challenges

Achieving the goals of a more inclusive board leadership still requires overcoming several challenges highlighted by respondents, including:

### Resistance to change

Resistance to change is one of the most significant barriers to creating a more inclusive board leadership. This resistance can stem from numerous factors, such as entrenched cultural norms, fear of the unknown, or a lack of understanding about the benefits of diversity and inclusion.

Overcoming this resistance requires persistent effort, clear communication of the benefits, and the active involvement of all board members in the change process. Leaders must demonstrate a commitment to inclusion by modelling inclusive behaviours and making diversity a visible priority within the organisation. Additionally, providing education and training to help board members understand the value of diversity can facilitate a more receptive attitude towards change.

### Resource constraints

Implementing comprehensive training and support programs requires significant investment in both time and money. Given immediate budget constraints, this can be a challenging endeavour. However, it is crucial to recognise that these investments are necessary for long-term success.

While the upfront costs may be high, the long-term benefits of a more inclusive leadership—such as improved decision-making, better representation of diverse communities, and enhanced organisational performance—can outweigh these initial expenses. Furthermore, failure to invest in diversity and inclusion can lead to longer-term societal costs and negative implications for the NHS and its service users. Thus, it is essential for boards to prioritise and allocate resources strategically to support these initiatives.

### Broader issues

Addressing broader issues, such as institutional racism, is essential for fostering a more inclusive leadership. Organisations must be honest about these challenges and committed to tackling them comprehensively. This requires a multifaceted approach that includes revising policies and practices that perpetuate inequality, promoting transparency and accountability, and actively engaging with diverse communities to understand their needs and perspectives.

Implementing anti-racism training, creating safe spaces for open dialogue, and establishing clear mechanisms for reporting and addressing discrimination are critical steps in this process. Additionally, organisations should regularly assess their progress and make necessary adjustments to ensure that their efforts are effective and sustainable.

"The biggest issue in the NHS is too much shoulder tapping and known friends or colleagues being given board level roles versus an objective equalities process for recruitment."

"We are here to make a positive difference."

# Suggestions to improve retention and inclusivity of diverse board members

Given the opportunity to provide their experiences, thoughts, and suggestions on how best to improve the experience of ethnic minority colleagues operating as a NED, their feedback is summarised below under key themes that came through and ideas to enhance the retention and inclusivity of board members. Whilst many of these are not new, and may seem obvious, this survey highlights that in being suggested by respondents, they are either not being implemented appropriately, with enough frequency and regularity, not being updated as situations change, nor being adhered to in day-to-day practice.

" We need to assess where BAE NEDs progress to and how long it takes them to do so within the Trust and across the NHS in other roles such as Chair positions."
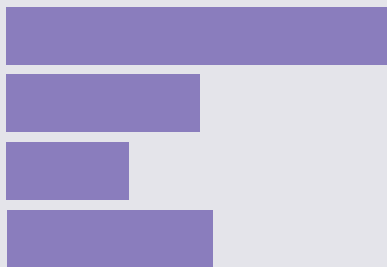
## The role of the Chair

The Chair's pivotal role in motivating staff to promote diversity and cultivate a culture of inclusion emerged as a key theme among respondents, with their considerable influence in shaping organisational culture seen as crucial but sometimes insufficient. The Chair's actions, decisions, and communications significantly impact the tone and direction of the organisation, aligning culture with its vision, mission, and goals to ensure shared objectives and standards of behaviour. Their authority over decision-making and resource allocation is essential in embedding equality, inclusion, and diversity.

A common suggestion was that Chairs should proactively seek and listen to the views of those affected by discrimination, as this enhances their ability to reinforce cultural norms and values through behaviour and communication. By engaging with diverse perspectives, Chairs can better understand and resolve issues while promoting and embodying the principles of diversity and inclusion. This initiative-taking approach also enables them to provide and implement effective support, such as practical help, educational resources, and recognition of efforts, empowering employees to contribute meaningfully to diversity initiatives.

## Board members commitment

Survey respondents expressed a desire for senior leaders to show a stronger, more visible commitment to promoting diversity and inclusion within their organisations.

They should be more overt in communicating a clear and unwavering dedication to EDI values, ensuring that organisational priorities are aligned with diversity goals. By visibly modelling inclusive behaviours and championing diversity initiatives, leaders can set a powerful example.

Additionally, they should hold themselves and others accountable for making progress on the equality, diversity, and inclusion agenda. This should include measures to track progress on diversity and inclusion goals, and hold others accountable for their contributions here, set measurable objectives, track key performance indicators, and conduct regular assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of diversity initiatives and help identify areas for improvement, all of which should be included regularly in board evaluations.

## Education and training

Respondents emphasised the need for more comprehensive education and training programmes to raise awareness of diversity and inclusion issues.

It was suggested that ongoing and refresher courses should be provided to equip staff with the necessary knowledge, skills, and tools to promote diversity in their work environments. The training should cover topics such as unconscious bias, cultural intelligence, inclusive leadership, bystander intervention, and respectful communication methods.

This also included improved on-boarding processes - as they stand, they're seen as insufficient, especially for those new to the NHS.

" We have to keep going. Though some things may be tough, we are here to make a positive difference."

> **"We need to do some research into the difference BAE NEDs have made to boards and the NHS compared to those boards that are less diverse."**

### Open communication

Respondents stressed the importance of fostering open and transparent communication channels where employees feel comfortable discussing diversity and inclusion topics, sharing experiences, and providing feedback.

They suggested encouraging dialogue through employee resource groups, diversity forums, town hall meetings, and anonymous feedback mechanisms to solicit diverse perspectives and ideas.

In this was also noted transparency about the realistic time commitment of NED roles – not always honestly reflected in job descriptions and recruitment processes at present, and the impact this has on those with other commitments, including full-time roles, family or caring responsibilities – which should also be taken into account around flexibility of board meeting timetabling and/or other associated requirements.

### Empowerment

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are seen as critical to providing a platform for employees to connect, support one another, and advocate for diversity and inclusion, but this must include senior leaders supporting them with the necessary resources, leadership development opportunities, and sponsorship. In so doing, ERGs not only empower but also promote ownership of diversity and inclusion initiatives by providing them with the autonomy, resources, and support needed to drive meaningful change. And this approach not only enables and encourages employees to connect, support one another, and advocate for diversity, but also to lead projects and initiatives aligned with their interests and expertise.

### Recognition

Recognise and celebrate employees who demonstrate a commitment to promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Acknowledge their contributions through formal recognition programs, awards, and praise from senior leadership. By highlighting success stories and best practices, this helps inspire others and reinforce the organisation's values.

> **"In my view, Associate NEDs are often overlooked...especially if they happen to be BAME".**

> **"We need a stronger tone at the top."**

# Conclusion

The journey towards more inclusive board leadership is an essential endeavour. While progress has been made, significant challenges persist that require sustained effort, deep commitment, and strategic investment.

Overcoming resistance to change, addressing resource constraints, and tackling historical issues entrenched within organisational cultures are all necessary steps to achieving a more equitable and inclusive environment. These changes not only benefit the board members themselves but also have a wider impact on the communities these organisations serve. It is by taking these challenges head-on that organisations can build stronger, more inclusive cultures that serve as the foundation for sustained success.

The survey results offer a comprehensive examination of the current state of diversity and inclusion for ethnic minority NEDs within NHS boards. While there have been efforts to create more inclusive environments and foster open dialogue, the data highlights significant and persistent challenges. High incidences of discrimination and microaggressions were reported and a considerable number of respondents expressed doubts about their boards' effectiveness in promoting diversity and inclusion.

"Observe other boards. Especially diverse ones!"

"The whole board needs to be behind creating an inclusive culture. It can't be done by individuals."

These findings highlight the necessity of implementing focused and sustained efforts to cultivate genuinely inclusive boardrooms. Without a consistent commitment to addressing these issues, the progress towards inclusivity will remain slow, and the full potential of diverse leadership will not be realised.

Given these challenges, which include the high turnover rates and continued experiences of discrimination, it is imperative that existing strategies be shaped, implemented, and continuously reviewed to create a more supportive and inclusive environment.

Addressing these issues at a structural level will allow organisations to empower NEDs to take proactive steps in promoting diversity and inclusion. By fostering a culture of belonging and respect, organisations can build workplaces where all employees feel empowered to contribute their full potential and are motivated to stay within their current Trusts. This commitment to inclusivity ensures that NEDs not only remain engaged but can also bring their inclusive leadership experience to future roles and organisations, further spreading the benefits of diverse perspectives.

Retention rates for board members in the UK vary significantly across different sectors, and while specific data on NHS Non-Executive Directors (NEDs) is limited, the broader trends in employee turnover and retention provide valuable insight. Retention in leadership roles is critical to maintaining strategic direction and organisational stability. High turnover can disrupt the progress made in fostering an inclusive culture, undermining efforts to create long-term, sustainable change.

To address retention challenges, organisations must focus on creating environments where board members feel their contributions are valued, where there is a clear sense of impact, and where collaboration and transparency are prioritised. Regular engagement, open communication, and support for professional development are key strategies for retaining top leadership talent. Tailoring these strategies to the unique needs of board members can significantly enhance retention in these high-impact roles, allowing organisations to maintain a stable and effective leadership team.

One limitation of this survey is its focus on a specific sub-group of diversity, which may not fully capture the broader challenges faced by the NHS. This narrow scope could reflect a wider sense of dissatisfaction with the current state of the NHS and the demanding nature of board roles, rather than issues specific to diversity and inclusion.

It raises the question of whether the dissatisfaction and high attrition rates observed in this survey are unique to this sub-group or whether similar trends are present among other diverse groups within the NHS.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced, it would be valuable to compare the survey's findings with the experiences of other diverse groups within the NHS, including white Non-Executive Directors. By broadening the scope to include a wider spectrum of NEDs, we can better assess whether the issues of attrition and dissatisfaction are widespread or affect certain groups.

"What can white NEDs do to be more inclusive and welcoming of diversity? They should be more proactive in learning and applying this and demonstrating it in role to become confidently conversant. They should peer mentor BAE NEDs."

This comparison would provide insight into whether the challenges are systemic across all NHS boards or disproportionately impact specific demographics. Understanding these nuances is essential for developing targeted strategies that improve retention, enhance satisfaction, and ensure that diversity and inclusion initiatives are not only effective but equitable for all members of NHS boards.

This comprehensive approach will contribute to the creation of more inclusive leadership that reflects the diversity of the communities served by the NHS, fostering a stronger and more resilient organisational culture.

If you would like to discuss the findings in this report, or would like to explore how we can support you with our services, please contact:

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**Senior Consultant, Health**
melanie.west@gatenbysanderson.com

"We need to research the difference BAE have made to boards."

# Gatenby Sanderson

GatenbySanderson is the UK's leading people advisory firm across public services, not for profit and education. Working within complex, challenging and highly scrutinised environments we deliver executive search, interim leadership and leadership development and consultancy.