

Bristol Women in Business Charter goals are a framework for business change

Our ambition for Bristol

Bristol has always been a bit different, challenging the status quo and attracting people and businesses that lead on change.

We were the first (and only) city in the UK to sign the [European Charter for the Equality of Women and Men in Local Life](#) and the first city in the UK to establish a [Women's Commission](#). We now want Bristol to be the first city to achieve gender equality.

We recognise that employers have a huge part to play in achieving this vision and that many businesses in Bristol want to make progress on gender equality. By recognising, supporting and bringing together those employers who are making or want to make progress, we believe we will accelerate the pace of change and make gender equality a reality.

Our ambition is for all businesses employing people in the Bristol area, regardless of their size, to sign the Charter and work together to make gender equality the way we do business in Bristol.

How the Charter goals were chosen

The seven goals of the Charter were carefully selected. They were identified against the backdrop of women's under-representation in leadership positions in business in Bristol. This under-representation is in the context that women comprise just over 50% of the Bristol population, are as equally as well qualified as men at degree level (32%) and that 60% of women are economically active in the Bristol area (either in employment or unemployed/looking for work).

However, women's under-representation at higher managerial/professional levels remains low (8% compared with 15% of men) with women more likely to be found in lower managerial/administrative and professional occupations (22% compared with 18% of men) (Bristol City Council, 2014). An initial analysis of just over 200 medium to large business in the Bristol area revealed that 49% have no women on their boards and that 51% had at least one, mainly in sectors such as health and education (Durbin, 2018).

There is a long established business case for increasing the representation of women at senior levels and on boards (e.g. Davies report, up to 2015); based upon improved company performance (e.g. Credit Suisse, 2015).

The challenges of harnessing female talent and increasing the numbers of women on boards is one faced by many businesses and by women themselves. The Charter goals were devised in 2018, to encourage Bristol-based organisations to make an on-going commitment to improve gender equality for women, by setting targets, through signing up to a set of overarching and connected set of goals that could be realistically achieved by any organisation. We keep them under constant review.

The goals are interrelated. They can either be achieved as stand-alone initiatives (e.g. promoting the use of flexible and reduced hours working – Goal 1) or as overlapping goals, e.g. the commitment to increase the number of women at senior levels and on the board (goal 2) which could be partly achieved through supporting women where they are under-represented through mentoring and networking (goal 7).

The goals therefore aim to tackle these gender inequalities in employment and to make the workplace more gender equal. All seven goals are evidence-based and can enable organisations to work towards this aim.

For example, in terms of making flexible working at all levels a reality (Goal 1) we know that while almost half of women in employment in Bristol work part-time (43.3%) nationally, just 4% of managers, directors and senior officials, work on a part-time basis (ONS, 2018) (e.g. up to 30 hours per week).

One way to increase the numbers of women at senior levels and on boards, would be to make reduced hours working more realistic at all levels in organisations. This can also be achieved through supporting women in lower paid and lower skilled occupations (who are more likely to work part-time) to progress through training and on-going support (Goal 4) and making at least one member of the executive team responsible for reporting on gender equality and inclusion (Goal 3).

Supporting women to progress is also important and evidence suggests that mentoring can assist women with both career progress and general support and to feel valued by receiving such support (Durbin, 2015; Groysberg, 2008) (Goal 7). Mentors can often be identified through formal and informal networking and organisations that support women's networks are seen to be more gender inclusive.

The Charter also calls for a commitment to close the gender pay gap (Goal 5) and we believe this can be partly achieved by ending the gender segregated nature of work, especially at more senior levels, where the vertical gender pay gap remains a problem for women.

How signatories are using the Charter goals

We've seen the companies that signed the Charter in 2019 make great progress. It is a requirement that signatories commit to making progress on at least one the Charter goals each year and that they make and report progress. We'll be compiling an annual report to showcase that progress every year in April, commencing in 2021.

Companies get to set their own targets on the goals of the Charter which means that, regardless of where they're starting from, all signatory companies can make measurable progress on gender equality.

Being a Charter signatory is a very public declaration to all of their stakeholders that a company is working actively to make progress on gender equality. Many signatories have also found that the Charter goals have helped them to really focus their efforts on making change happen and they've been able to use the goals as a framework to clarify their objectives and guide their actions.

The progress that has been made

We've seen one of our founding signatories, Bristol Airport Ltd, use gender neutral recruitment practices to achieve their target (for the year) of 35% female applicants, investing in specialist software to support their reporting around that.

Bristol City Council, another founding signatory, has used workforce data and a new interactive HR dashboard to identify and begin to address diversity gaps in progression, pay, recruitment and flexible working.

One of smaller signatory companies, ADLIB, has appointed 2 women to its Board in the last 12 months. It's their male CEO, Nick Dean, who takes the responsibility for reporting on gender and inclusion. At Burges Salmon (a founding signatory of the Charter), it's Senior Partner Chris Seaton who chairs their newly established Gender Taskforce.

Burges Salmon have also introduced a career focus training programme, aimed at improving transparency around career development opportunities. At one of our smallest signatories, Chickp, which employs just 4 people has implemented new unbiased onboarding processes and on-the-job training and they are currently implementing an appraisal process, all with the aim of improving transparency and fairness.

Founding signatory company OVO Energy is working to increase the number of women appointed to their technology roles, revamping the recruitment process and building in checks for gender-bias. As a result women are now 21% of new hires to tech roles.

Another of our founding signatories, Pelican Business Services launched a campaign (#LetsMoveMore) to support internal moves and career progression. This included a management job swap across the whole business, which challenged many traditional stereotypes. Whilst gcp Chartered Architects have added more women to their senior management team and Ian Williams Ltd have further enhanced their family friendly benefits including their maternity and paternity leave provision.

You can find a list of all of the current Charter signatory companies [here](#). We'll be publishing an interim impact report later this year with lots more information about the progress our signatory community has made. Look out for it on our [website](#) and on our social media channels: [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#).

How to make progress on gender equality

We know that leadership is a significant factor in making progress on gender equality (and indeed any change of magnitude). Companies that not only have senior managers who are supportive of change, such as Charley Maher at the Wessex Group (Pelican Business Services, water2business and Flipper are all Charter signatories) and Helen Hodgkinson in her role as HR Director at TLT LLP, but also leadership from the middle will make more progress. Signing the Charter has helped leaders at every level bring gender equality to the fore.

Focus, focus, focus. We know that there are many changing priorities in business. The Charter goals can help you keep focused on the right things to do around gender equality and being a signatory helps keep it on the agenda at the right level in your business.

Gender equal businesses operate differently. Making equality part of your organisational culture and 'the way we do things around here' brings very different results too. The Charter can help engage people within your business at every level, opening the conversation about how to make everyone feel they belong and supporting culture change.

How the Charter Team can help

Being part of the Charter community means being part of a group of progressive businesses, openly committed to making progress on gender equality. We bring signatories together at least once a quarter to connect and share their experiences, learning, ideas and challenges about making change happen.

We will be sharing highlights of their progress on an annual basis but becoming a Charter signatory means you don't have to wait. It means that you can be part of an open dialogue with similar companies and the people who are implementing change within them, finding people and companies that have faced similar challenges to those you're facing.

We know that making progress on gender equality can be really hard work and it can at times feel like a thankless task. It's much easier when you know that you're not alone. That's why we recognise and celebrate the progress that all our signatories are making.

Join us! Together we can make Bristol a fairer and more equal city. Find out more and apply [here](#).

This blog was co-authored by [Jane Ginnever](#) MBA MSc and [Professor Susan Durbin](#) PhD MCIPD. Jane led the Task Group that launched the Bristol Women in Business Charter in March 2019 and is now Director of the Women in Business CIC that operates the Charter. Professor Durbin is Professor of Human Resource Management at the University of the West of England, a member of the Women in Business Task Group (part of the Bristol Women's Commission). She created the current version of the Charter and its goals in 2018.