



The Commissioner  
for Public Appointments  
Northern Ireland

“Guardian of the Public Appointment Process”

Audit Report 2014/2015

Appointment of one member to the Livestock and Meat Commission

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

June 2014

## Introduction

1. A competition to appoint one member to the Livestock and Meat Commission was selected for audit as part of the 2014/15 audit programme of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland (CPANI). This competition was administered by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD).
2. The audit was conducted under the Commissioner for Public Appointments (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (as amended) and was designed to assess compliance with the 'Code of Practice for Ministerial Public Appointments in Northern Ireland' (the Code), version issued September 2012 (updated September 2013).
3. The Commissioner is required, by law, to prescribe and publish the Code to regulate the process by which public appointments are made. The Code sets out principles and practices which the Commissioner requires Government Departments to adopt.
4. The role of the Commissioner is to regulate, monitor, report and advise on the way in which Ministers make appointments to the Boards of public bodies in Northern Ireland. The Commissioner's key concern is to ensure that public appointments are made in ways that are open, transparent and merit-based.
5. Responsibility for appointments rests with the relevant Minister.
6. Northern Ireland Government Departments have the responsibility of ensuring that the principles and practices contained in the Commissioner's Code are upheld throughout every public appointment recruitment competition.

## Approach

7. This audit report is the result of an examination of the appointment process, from which breaches of the Code, instances of 'less than best-practice' and instances of particularly good practice identified.
  - For each breach of the Code and each identified issue of 'less than best-practice', CPANI produces a recommendation which the Department must address.
  - Recommendations are summarised at the end of the report and will be followed up by CPANI in six months for evidence of implementation by the Department.

- Where instances of good practice are highlighted, it is hoped by CPANI that all Departments will study these for use in their own competitions.
8. CPANI carried out a comprehensive review of all appropriate records, as provided by the DARD Food Policy Branch. All documentation provided by the Department was of a high standard and it was comprehensive and well organised.

#### Acknowledgements

9. The Commissioner would like to thank the staff from the DARD Food Policy Branch for their assistance and cooperation throughout this audit.

### **Stage 1 – Initial Planning of recruitment competition**

#### Consultation with the Chair of the Livestock and Meat Commission

10. The Department consulted with the Chair of the Livestock and Meat Commission in the early stages of the planning process. It was agreed that the competition presented a good opportunity to strengthen the financial skills on the board. This was reflected in the essential criteria in the person specification.

#### Independent Assessor

11. CPANI allocated an Independent Assessor at the outset; the Assessor was involved in all stages of the selection process.

#### The Selection Panel

12. The selection panel consisted of the Chair of the Livestock and Meat Commission, a senior official from DARD and the Independent Assessor.
13. The Department ensured that all panel members were fully trained in line with the Code. The panel members signed confidentiality forms early in the process. All panel members were involved in all aspects of the selection process prior to the Ministerial decision.

#### Role Profile and Person Specification

14. The role profile and person specification were developed by DARD with input from the selection panel. These included all the information required by the Code.

15. In preparation for drafting the role profile and person specification, the Department performed a skills audit of the current Livestock and Meat Commission board. This included meeting with the Chair and Chief Executive of the Livestock and Meat Commission. This approach allowed the Department to identify those skills most required on the Livestock and Meat Commission board, and to focus the recruitment competition accordingly. This is recognised by CPANI as good practice.
16. Candidates were required to meet six essential criteria.

#### Ministerial Authorisation and Planning

17. A submission containing the role profile and person specification was approved by the Minister on 12 June 2013. The Minister requested an unranked alphabetical list of candidates suitable for appointment.
18. An appointment plan was prepared by the Department and agreed by the selection panel; however this was not included in the submission to the Minister. Paragraph 3.2 of the Code requires the Minister to agree the appointment plan along with the role profile and person specification. While some of the information required in the appointment plan was included elsewhere in the submission agreed by the Minister, the following items were not.
  - A clear procedure for handling an applicant's query regarding his or her omission from the short list or interview list.
  - A clear procedure when an applicant is unable to attend for assessment on the published date(s). Other items required in the appointment plan under paragraph 3.6 of the Code were covered at a basic level.
19. **Breach:** The Department breached paragraph 3.2 of the Code.

**Recommendation:** The Department must prepare an appointment plan, for all competitions, for agreement by the Minister in line with paragraph 3.2 of the Code.

## Stage 2 Preparation

### Information Pack and Application Form

20. The Information Pack included all the key components required by the Code.
21. The Information Pack informed applicants that the successful candidate would be entitled to claim,  
  
*“Any other appropriate expenses such as particular costs associated with disabilities.”*
22. This consideration by the Department for people with a disability is welcomed as a positive step in encouraging applications from this under-represented grouping.
23. The Application Form was clear and straightforward. It provided guidance to assist candidates in describing their skills and experience.
24. Throughout the Information Pack and Application Form, applicants were encouraged to provide examples, to address the essential criteria, drawing on their own skills and experience. Applicants were advised that whilst qualifications and details of previous employment were not an essential requirement for the post, they should use them to address specific criteria if they considered them to be relevant to those criteria. The guidance notes for Section Four of the Application Form contain the following advice:  
  
*“Make sure that you take full advantage of this section to provide practical experience and examples of how you feel you are suitable for a public appointment on the basis of the selection criteria...”*.
25. CPANI welcomes this positive approach by the Department in asking applicants to highlight their relevant skills, experience and qualifications, however gained, when addressing the criteria in the application form.
26. In section five of the Application Form, applicants were asked to provide a traditional list-style history, of employment and voluntary work. Applicants were advised that this information would not be used at the sift stage of the competition and that if it was relevant to any of the criteria then it should also be included under those criteria.

27. The positive approach by the Department highlighted in paragraphs 24 and 25, of this report, should remove the requirement for the list-style information requested in section five of the Application Form.
28. **Recommendation:** In future competitions, the requirement for a list-style employment history should be removed; applicants should continue to be encouraged to include the salient facts from their employment history in addressing specific criteria.
29. Applicants were asked to list all current and previous public appointments, including the remuneration involved. Departments are required by the Code to include, in a press release, any current Ministerial public appointments held by the successful candidate(s) and details of any remuneration received. This does not necessitate a comprehensive list of all previous public appointments, including remuneration. Paragraph 3.21 of the Code requires that application forms *“should ask only what is truly required”*.
30. **Recommendation:** In future competitions the requirement to list details of any previous public appointments held should be removed.
31. Section four of the Application Form, which required applicants to demonstrate how they met the essential criteria, stated:  
  
*“It would be helpful if you provide clear examples in each case using continuation sheets as necessary.”*
32. This flexibility for applicants, in relation to their responses when completing the application form, is a practice rarely seen by CPANI in public appointment competitions. The Department should consider applying a limit to applicants’ responses to the criteria. This will aid the process for the selection panel and the Department, by requiring all applicants to be reasonably succinct in their answers.
33. **Recommendation:** The Department should consider restricting the responses from applicants to encourage succinctness.

### **Stage 3 - Encouraging Applications**

34. The vacancy was advertised at the end of June 2013 in the Belfast Telegraph, the Irish News and Newsletter, as well as in Farm Week, Farming Life and the Irish Farmers Journal. It was also posted on the DARD, CPANI and OFMDFM websites. A letter was issued to a wide range

of bodies, including those with an interest in the red meat sector, seeking nominees. It was made clear that any nominee would be subject to the full recruitment process. Letters encouraging applications were issued to a range of under-represented groups, and to people previously interested in a Livestock and Meat Commission appointment. Senior officials within the Department were asked to promote the vacancy to external stakeholders. CPANI commends the Department for the effort put into promoting the vacancy.

## **Stage 4 - Selection**

### Processing Applications

35. The closing date for applications was 08 August 2013. Eleven applications were received.

### Sift

36. In compliance with paragraph 4.6 of the Code, one applicant was removed from the competition having previously served two terms as a member of the Livestock and Meat Commission.

37. Selection panel members attended a meeting on 11 September 2013 to assess the applications for eligibility. Anonymous copies of all Application Forms were provided to the selection panel members prior to this meeting.

38. Selection panel members did not complete an individual eligibility assessment form for each applicant; a single eligibility assessment form was completed for each applicant and signed by all panel members. The completion of individual eligibility assessment forms by selection panel members is seen by CPANI as good practice.

39. **Recommendation:** In future competitions, individual panel members should complete an assessment form for each applicant. This will ensure a more transparent and detailed record of the determination of applicants' eligibility.

40. A letter to those applicants who did not pass the eligibility sift was issued on 13 September 2013. The letter advised applicants of the panel's decision and provided feedback on the criteria not met. Applicants were also advised that a review of the decision could be requested within fourteen days of the letter.

41. Five candidates passed the eligibility sift exercise and were invited for interview.

#### New Code of Practice

42. Following the sift, and prior to the interviews, a new version of the CPANI Code was issued. All selection panel members were issued with a copy of the new Code, advised of the changes and asked to satisfy themselves that they were familiar with the new Code. This diligent approach is commended.

#### Interview

43. A letter inviting candidates to interview was issued on 17 September 2013.
44. Interviews took place on 06 November 2013. Each panel member completed an individual interview assessment form for each candidate, to record the evidence presented against the criteria. An agreed panel summary interview assessment sheet was subsequently completed and signed by all panel members. This included the agreed panel score along with summary evidence for each criterion and summary comments relating to the overall performance at interview.
45. All candidates were asked to identify any real or perceived conflicts of interest and were tested on issues of integrity. They were also questioned on how they viewed the role of a Livestock and Meat Commission board member in terms of adhering to the principles of public life.
46. One candidate withdrew from the competition prior to interview.

#### Applicant Summary

47. At interview, two candidates were found to be suitable for appointment.
48. The two candidates found unsuitable for appointment were informed of the decision in a letter issued 20 November 2013.
49. Applicant summaries were drafted by the Department and agreed by the selection panel. Each applicant summary gave a balanced and accurate summary, of the information provided by the candidates in their Application Forms and the findings and comments of the selection panel at interview.



### Ministerial Decision

50. An alphabetical list of the two candidates found suitable for appointment was submitted to the Minister on 10 December 2013. On 19 December 2013, the Minister selected one candidate for appointment.
51. The successful candidate was informed of the decision in a telephone call.
52. A letter formally offering the position to the successful candidate was issued on 21 January 2014. The successful candidate formally accepted the offer on 23 January 2014.
53. The unsuccessful candidate was informed of the decision by letter dated 27 January. This was the first correspondence with this candidate since the interview in early November. Paragraph 3.25 of the Code states.

*“Everyone who applies for a post must be kept informed by the Department of the progress and ultimate outcome of his or her application in a timely and courteous manner.”*

54. This candidate should have been kept apprised of the situation.
55. **Breach:** The Department breached paragraph 3.25 of the Code.

**Recommendation:** The Department must ensure that all candidates are kept informed of the progress of their applications.

### Announcing the Appointment

56. The Department announced the appointment in a press release which fulfilled the requirements of the Code.

### **General Conclusions**

57. This audit revealed two breaches of the Code, and four instances of ‘less than best-practice’ in respect of which six recommendations are detailed in section nine. Despite the issues identified, the competition was generally well run and it will be noted that CPANI has highlighted several instances of particularly good practice. The Commissioner would hope that by addressing all of the recommendations, the Department will ensure that the high standard the Department is clearly capable of will be exhibited throughout their future competitions.

### Summary of Recommendations

58. The Department must prepare an appointment plan, for all competitions, for agreement by the Minister in line with paragraph 3.2 of the Code.
59. In future competitions, the requirement for a list-style employment history should be removed; applicants should continue to be encouraged to include the salient facts from their employment history in addressing specific criteria.
60. In future competitions the requirement to list details of any previous public appointments held should be removed.
61. The Department should consider restricting the responses from applicants to encourage succinctness.
62. In future competitions, individual panel members should complete an assessment form for each applicant. This will ensure a more transparent and detailed record of the determination of applicants' eligibility.
63. The Department must ensure that all candidates are kept informed of the progress of their applications.