



The Commissioner
for Public Appointments
Northern Ireland

“Guardian of the Public Appointment Process”

Audit Report 2013/14

Department for Social Development

Appointment of one member to the Board of the Northern Ireland housing

Executive

July 2013

Introduction

1. The Commissioner for Public Appointments (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 requires the Commissioner 'to carry out an audit to review the policies and practices of Departments in making public appointments to establish whether the Code of Practice is being observed'. This audit was carried out in the context of the Commissioner's Code of Practice for Ministerial Appointments in Northern Ireland (the Code) version released September 2012.
2. A competition carried out by the Department for Social Development (DSD) was selected to be audited during the 2013/14 year. The main objective was to evaluate whether the Ministerial appointment of one member to the board of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) was made in accordance with the Code. The Commissioner wrote to the Permanent Secretary informing him of the decision to carry out the audit.
3. What follows are the results of a stage by stage examination of the process used to make the appointment, using the Code as a guide.
4. The Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland (CPANI) would like to thank the staff from the Housing Director's Office, DSD for their assistance and co-operation during this audit.

Ministerial Responsibility and Involvement

5. It was clear that the Department gave careful consideration to the selection criteria for the member post, through consultation with the Chair of the NIHE.
6. A submission dated 14 December 2012 requested Ministerial approval for all necessary aspects of the process. The Minister approved the submission on 19 December 2012 and requested an unranked list of candidates suitable for appointment to be presented to him.

Planning

7. The person specification contained five essential criteria and one desirable criterion.
8. The Department prepared a detailed and comprehensive appointment plan that addressed all the requirements of the Code.

9. The selection panel comprised a Departmental representative, the Chair of the NIHE and an Independent Assessor allocated by CPANI. All selection panel members were trained in line with the requirements of the Code.

Encouraging Applications

10. Publicity was designed to ensure that a wide and diverse audience was made aware of the appointments and encouraged to apply. The vacancy was advertised in five newspapers; one national and four regional. It appeared on the websites of the NIHE, the Belfast Telegraph and the Guardian. The Department posted the vacancy on its website and Twitter account.
11. To raise awareness and promote interest among clients and tenants the advertisement was distributed to Disability Action and the Housing Community Network.
12. The advertisement was available in large font, and carried the CPANI logo. However, at the time of publication the advertisement was not copied to CPANI, in line with the Code.
13. **Recommendation:** The Department should ensure that all advertisements are provided to CPANI at the time of publication as required in paragraph 3.18 of the Code.

Information Pack / Application Form

14. The information pack addressed all the requirements of the Code. It was clear, straightforward and the language used was consistent with the application form and guidance notes.
15. In order to encourage potential applicants with non-traditional career-paths and backgrounds the guidance notes included the following welcome statement, *'The Department is not just interested in people who have a traditional career path. Many appointments are open to people who do voluntary or community work. Make sure you take full advantage of this Section to provide practical evidence and examples of how you feel you are suitable for a public appointment, on the basis of the selection criteria for appointees, as outlined in your information pack'*.
16. The application form included a section which allowed applicants to detail their work experience/employment details and their qualifications. This included the statement *'This*

section is not mandatory. You need only complete this section if you feel it is relevant to your application'. A standard Departmental template application for public appointments was used for this competition.

17. **Recommendation:** The Department should consider that if work experience/employment details or qualifications are not part of the selection process then they are an unnecessary part of the template application form.
18. Potential applicants were required to submit a hard copy of their application form. E-mailed versions were not permitted. Paragraph 3.21 of the Code states that 'arbitrary restrictions on the use of technology in completing application forms are discriminatory and should not be included'.
19. **Recommendation:** The Department should comply with the Code by adjusting its systems to permit the electronic submission of application forms.
20. The application form stated: 'The Commissioner for Public Appointments for NI requires Departments to monitor the gender, age, ethnic origin, community background and disability of candidates to ensure that equal opportunity measures are effective'. This is factually incorrect. The Commissioner does not require this.
21. **Recommendation:** The Department should ensure that any statement regarding monitoring information is factually correct.
22. Monitoring forms requested applicant names.
23. **Recommendation:** The Department should give consideration to a form of coding of monitoring forms, rather than using applicant names, to ensure anonymity.
24. Applicants were not made aware on the application form that, if appointed, some of the information they provide will be placed in the public domain. This is a requirement of paragraph 3.23 of the Code.
25. **Recommendation:** The Department should ensure that it complies with paragraph 3.23 of the Code with respect to the public disclosure of information on appointees.

Processing and Assessing applications

Closing date / Informing applicants of progress

26. The closing date was 3pm on 06 February 2013. This allowed an application period of four weeks. The closing date was stated clearly in the application form. No late applications were received. Upon receipt of applications an acknowledgement letter dated 12 February 2013 was issued to all candidates.

Selection of Applicants

27. Twenty-nine applications were received. The short-listing meeting was carried out on 20 and 21 February 2013. Prior to the first meeting the selection panel was provided with a short-listing pack that contained a copy of each application form, individual sift scoring sheets and panel member sifting guidance. Each panel member carried out an individual assessment of each application prior to the meeting. The Department retained the necessary supporting documentation regarding individual and agreed panel member sift assessments.
28. The selection panel discussed and confirmed that they did not have any conflicts of interest with any applicant.
29. The panel agreed that eleven candidates, who met the five essential selection criteria, should be invited for interview.
30. The panel agreed an interview marking framework. Guidance on scoring was provided to each panel member.

Final Assessment

31. Interviews for the eleven candidates took place on 12 and 20 March 2013. Three candidates were found suitable for appointment. The Department retained the necessary documentation to support the outcome. All panel members agreed each applicant's score and applicant summary.

Integrity and Potential Appointees

32. The candidates were questioned on integrity and conflicts of interest. No issues were identified.

Appointment

Ministerial Submission

33. A submission was provided to the Minister on 26 March 2013. It included an applicant summary for each of the three candidates. The summary provided an 'objective analysis of each applicant's skills and experience, based on the information provided by each applicant during the appointment round and the selection panel's assessment of that applicant' as required by the Code, paragraph 3.42.

Ministerial Decision

34. On the 28 March 2013 the Minister selected one candidate for appointment and agreed to establish a reserve list consisting of the two remaining candidates. The Minister formally recorded his reasons for appointing the successful candidate.

Post Ministerial Decision

Feedback

35. The Department had clear and comprehensive procedures on handling requests for feedback and reassessment.
36. Following the sift assessment one applicant requested reassessment and two applicants requested feedback. Both the reassessment and feedback were carried out in accordance with Departmental procedures.
37. A candidate selected by the Minister for inclusion on the reserve list requested feedback on 09 April 2013. A candidate unsuccessful at interview requested feedback on 10 April 2013. Feedback was provided by the selection panel Chair on 17 April 2013, in line with the Code.

Announcing the Appointment

38. The Department wrote to the appointed candidate on 28 March 2013 to advise him of the Minister's decision. The Minister formally wrote to him on 11 April 2013. The Chair of the selection panel wrote to the reserve list candidates on 28 March 2013 to advise them of the Minister's decision to include them on a reserve list for up to one year. Letters were also issued from the panel Chair on 29 March 2013 to the eight candidates who were unsuccessful at interview. All members of the selection panel were advised of the Minister's decision prior to the public announcement.
39. The public announcement was issued as a press release on 12 April 2013. The press release did not provide a summary of the skills and knowledge that the appointee would bring to the role, as displayed at interview and which had been included in the applicant summaries agreed by the selection panel.
40. The Department should ensure that future public announcements include a brief summary of the skills and knowledge that the appointee brings to the role.

General Observations

41. Whilst the competition was generally well planned and well run, there are improvements which can be made in future competitions. If Departments use templates for, for example, application forms, they should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that they are up to date.

Overall Conclusions

42. The evidence demonstrates that the Department complied with the Code in most respects. Action will be required to address the seven recommendations below. A follow up of the audit will be conducted in six months time.

Recommendations

43. The Department should ensure that all advertisements are provided to CPANI at the time of publication as required in paragraph 3.18 of the Code.

44. The Department should consider that if work experience/employment details or qualifications are not part of the selection process then they are an unnecessary part of the template application form.
45. The Department should comply with the Code by adjusting its systems to permit the electronic submission of application forms.
46. The Department should ensure that any statement regarding monitoring information is factually correct.
47. The Department should give consideration to a form of coding of monitoring forms, rather than using applicants' names, to ensure anonymity.
48. The Department should comply with paragraph 3.23 of the Code with respect to the public disclosure of information on appointees.
49. The Department should ensure that future public announcements include a brief summary of the skills and knowledge that the appointee brings to the role.