

CPANI

The Commissioner
for Public Appointments
Northern Ireland

“Guardian of the Public Appointments Process”

Audit Report 2013/2014

Appointment of Chair to the Board of Northern Ireland Screen

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

December 2013

Introduction

- 1.01 A competition to appoint a Chair to the Board of Northern Ireland Screen (NI Screen) was selected for audit as part of the 2013/14 audit programme of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland (CPA NI). This competition was administered by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL).
- 1.02 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.
- 1.03 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.
- 1.04 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.
- 1.05 Responsibility for appointments rests with the relevant Minister.
- 1.06 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

- 2.01 This audit report is the result of an examination of the appointment process, from which audit issues have been identified, recommendations made, and elements of good practice commended.
- 2.02 CPA NI carried out a comprehensive review of all appropriate records, as provided by the DCAL Corporate Strategy & North South Unit.

Acknowledgements

- 3.01 The Commissioner would like to thank the staff from DCAL Corporate Strategy & North South Unit for their assistance and co-operation during this audit.

Stage 1 – Initial Planning of recruitment competition

Independent Assessor

- 4.01 CPA NI allocated an Independent Assessor at the outset of the process. The Department consulted with the Assessor on the publicity and Information Pack prior to publication. The Assessor was involved in all stages of the process.

Consultation with NI Screen

- 4.02 The Department contacted the outgoing Chair of NI Screen on 5th July 2012 asking for his views on the criteria for the post. The Chair's suggestions were incorporated into the criteria.

The Selection Panel

- 4.03 The selection panel consisted of a senior official from DCAL, the Independent Assessor and a representative of Invest NI, a funder of NI Screen.
- 4.04 The Department ensured that panel members were fully trained in line with the Code. All panel members were involved in all aspects of the selection process prior to the Ministerial decision.

Role Profile and Person Specification

- 4.05 The draft role profile and person specification were developed by DCAL with input from the selection panel.
- 4.06 Candidates were required to meet five essential criteria. A further desirable criterion was included should it be required for short-listing purposes.

Ministerial Authorisation and Planning

- 4.07 A submission to the Minister, containing the role profile, person specification and appointment plan was approved on 10th December 2012. The Minister requested an unranked alphabetical pool of appointable candidates.

Other issues at the Planning stage

- 4.08 Consideration of breadth/diversity and widening the potential pool of candidates was apparent both in the publicity and in the Information Pack.

Stage 2 - Preparation

Information Pack

- 5.01 The Information Pack included all the key information required by the Code.

Application Form

- 5.02 The application form was clear and straightforward and asked only what was truly required. It provided guidance to assist candidates in describing their skills and experience against the criteria.
- 5.03 The Department accepted applications by e-mail or hard copy.

Monitoring Form

- 5.04 Monitoring forms requested the applicant name.

Recommendation: The Department should give consideration to a form of coding of monitoring forms, rather than using applicant names, to ensure anonymity.

5.05 The monitoring form contained a question on disability, stating.

“If you have answered “yes” and are subsequently invited to interview, you will be asked to identify any particular requirements you may have at that time.”

It would be more appropriate to request such information in the application form rather than in the monitoring form, which is to be used solely for monitoring purposes and should therefore not feature further in the application process.

Recommendation: Requests for candidates to identify particular requirements for interview should be included in the application form and not the monitoring form.

Stage 3 - Encouraging Applications

6.01 The vacancy was advertised in the Belfast Telegraph, the Irish News and the News Letter in January 2013. It was also posted on the websites of CPA NI, DCAL, Disability Action, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), NI Screen and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA).

6.02 The Department contacted Disability Action, NICVA and NI Screen to request that the vacancy be publicised in their circulation literature. Section 75 groups and a range of interested parties were also contacted.

6.03 At the request of the Permanent Secretary, and with the agreement of the Minister, an advisor on corporate matters, sourced from the SIB [Strategic Investment Board] consulted with a range of stakeholders in an effort to widen the field of prospective candidates.

Good Practice: The Commissioner commends the Department for the effort put into promotion of the vacancy.

Stage 4 - Selection

Processing Applications

7.01 The closing date for applications was 12 noon, Friday 8th February 2013. Ten applications were received.

7.02 The application form included the following statement.

“Please Note: applications submitted by e-mail will be accepted with a scanned-in signature, if this is not possible a signature can be provided at a later stage in the process.”

The Department did not obtain signatures from the candidates.

Recommendation: Any procedure set out in the competition literature should be implemented and followed through by the Department.

Sift

- 7.03 A pre-sift meeting was held on 5th February 2013, at which the selection panel signed the confidentiality agreement.
- 7.04 The names of all applicants were issued to the Selection Panel prior to the sift meeting. Panel members were asked to declare if an applicant was known to them and whether or not a conflict of interest existed. While two panel members confirmed that at least one applicant was known to them, no conflicts of interest were declared.
- 7.05 Panel members attended a further sift meeting on 21st February 2013 to assess the applications for eligibility. Panel members were issued with all relevant documentation including a copy of each application form. These included the applicant name but no other personal information.
- Each member of the selection panel completed an individual shortlisting form for each applicant, with a score and brief comments given against the criteria. The desirable criterion was not required.
- 7.06 A summary of the panel's collective decision on each applicant was documented. A summary report on the outcome of the sift meeting was drafted, issued to, and agreed by, all selection panel members.
- 7.07 A letter to those applicants who did not pass the eligibility sift was issued on 25th February 2013. The letter advised applicants of the panel's decision and provided information on how to request feedback. Applicants were also advised that a review of the decision could be requested, the deadline for receipt of any such request being 11th March 2013.
- 7.08 Six candidates passed the eligibility sift exercise and were invited for interview.

Interview

- 7.09 A letter inviting candidates to interview was issued on 25th February 2013.
- 7.10 Interviews took place on 25th March 2013. Each panel member completed a candidate interview assessment form for each candidate, to record the evidence presented against each of the criteria. Collective panel comments were recorded by the Chair.
- 7.11 All candidates were asked to identify any real or perceived conflicts of interest and were tested on issues of probity; candidates were also questioned on the time commitment for the post and the seven principles of public life.

- 7.12 The selection panel took the opportunity to gather feedback from candidates on the information candidates had received from the Department, the appointment process as a whole, and the way in which their application had been handled.

Good Practice: The Commissioner commends this innovative approach to applicant feedback taken by the Department.

- 7.13 A summary note of interview scores and candidate suitability for appointment was completed and signed by the panel.

- 7.14 An applicant summary was agreed by the selection panel. Applicant summaries are expected to contain an analysis of each applicant's skills and experience, based on the information provided during the appointment round and the selection panel's assessment of that applicant.

The applicant summary for this competition displayed a marked emphasis on information gleaned from the application forms, with less attention being paid to the candidates' performance at interview.

Recommendation: Those preparing the applicant summaries should strive for a better balance of use of information from the application form and the interview notes. The panel members, in signing-off the applicant summary, should have regard to this balance.

Ministerial Submission

- 7.15 Three candidates from the six interviewed were assessed by the panel as being suitable for appointment. An alphabetical list was issued to the Minister, on 15th April 2013.

- 7.16 The Minister selected one candidate on 29th May 2013; the two remaining appointable candidates were added to a reserve list. Letters were issued on 29th May to all candidates, informing them of the outcome of their interviews.

- 7.17 There was no contact with candidates, for a period of more than nine weeks, between the date of the interview (25th March 2013) and the 29th May 2013. 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."

To ensure all candidates were kept apprised of the situation, contact should have been made with them during this time period.

Recommendation: The Department should ensure that all candidates are kept informed of the progress of their application.

Feedback

- 7.18 One request for feedback was received on 30th May 2013. Feedback was provided by a panel member as the Chair of the panel had since retired. This is in line with paragraph 3.47 of the Code. The letter providing feedback was issued on 7th June 2013.

Announcing the Appointment

- 7.19 The Department announced the appointment in a press release which fulfilled the requirements of the Code of Practice.

General Conclusions

- 8.01 Overall, this was a well planned and well run competition. Five recommendations for improvement have been identified and two examples of good practice have been highlighted for commendation.

A follow-up review of this audit will be conducted in six months.

Summary of Recommendations

- 9.01 The Department should give consideration to a form of coding of monitoring forms, rather than using applicant names, to ensure anonymity.
- 9.02 Requests for candidates to identify particular requirements for interview should be included in the application form and not the monitoring form.
- 9.03 Any procedure set out in the competition literature should be implemented and followed through by the Department.
- 9.04 Those preparing the applicant summaries should strive for a better balance of use of information from the application form and the interview notes. The panel members, in signing-off the applicant summary, should have regard to this balance.
- 9.05 The Department should ensure that all candidates are kept informed of the progress of their application.