

Additional Information from Applicants

Guidance for OCPAS Assessors and other selection panel members

Background

This guidance is in line with the recommendations from *Diversity Delivers*, the first equal opportunities strategy for public appointments in Scotland. The strategy is explicit about the need to encourage a wide range of suitable applicants. The research underpinning the strategy highlighted the difficulties faced by certain groups when completing the application form. In addition, panels often receive application forms which indicate potential but do not provide sufficient information on how the individual meets the selection criteria.

The purpose of this guidance is to describe how panels might take a new approach to shortlisting. This new approach enables people whose applications demonstrate they have the potential to meet the selection criteria to be considered for interview.

Identifying appointable candidates is a two stage process. The first stage requires people to demonstrate in writing that they meet the criteria for a role. The second stage requires people to demonstrate at interview that they meet the criteria for a role.

Selection panels can now take a different approach to the first stage. This different approach:

- allows selection panels to ask applicants, who would otherwise not be invited to interview, for extra written information
- gives applicants another opportunity to demonstrate in writing that they meet the selection criteria and therefore merit interview.

How the changes will work in practice

- The option to use this different approach should be considered by every panel during the early planning meeting. It should be considered as a useful way of enabling more applicants to reach interview. The time required for the use of the alternative approach should be considered when the appointment timetable is drawn up.
- The panel does not require an exception to the Code to use this different approach. All that is required is the unanimous agreement of the selection panel members at the early planning meeting.
- Where this approach is used, the application form must make it clear that applicants may be contacted for more information.
- Where a panel agrees that it may use this approach, the dates on which additional information may be requested and the deadline for the return of such information must be included in the timetable issued to applicants.

- Selection panel members must agree unanimously that the initial form provided by a given applicant contains sufficient information to make it appropriate to ask the applicant for more.
- The panel chair must make the request for additional information in writing.
- Panel members must sign off the content of the request.
- Sponsor teams must handle correspondence between the applicants asked to provide additional information and the selection panel in a manner that preserves anonymity.
- The panel's decision on whether to invite to interview must include its decision on and assessment of the additional information supplied by the applicants concerned.
- How the panel comes to and records its decision on the additional information provided is a matter for the panel.
- The Scottish Government must retain the documentation setting out the additional information provided by applicants, along with the original application.
- If this approach is used during a round, the OA must record this on the OCPAS Assessor's feedback form. The OA must also record whether, in their view, it made a difference to the outcome of the round.

How does a panel decide who to approach for further information?

Generally, applicants tend to fall into three categories:

1. Those whose application forms clearly meet the criteria
2. Those whose application forms demonstrate that they have the potential to meet the criteria
3. Those whose application forms clearly don't meet the criteria

Selection panels have the option of asking applicants from category 2 to provide further information. This is regardless of whether there are a good number of applicants from category 1.

It is difficult to provide a comprehensive list of responses which fall into category 2. Every round and application form differs. However the following may be useful prompts.

- Has an applicant provided information in response to two of three requirements bundled into one essential criterion?
- Has the applicant provided sufficient information in all but one of the essential boxes on the application form or left one box empty?

- Has the applicant provided sufficient information in the early boxes but less detail in later boxes?
- Has the applicant provided limited information in one of the essential or desirable boxes (where the person specification contains desirable criteria) which indicates ability in one of the essential areas, but not provided information in the appropriate essential box?
- Has the applicant provided a limited range of very strong examples which do not entirely cover the essential requirements but indicate they have the potential to meet the selection criteria?
- Has the applicant provided details of roles or positions held which indicate they have the potential to meet the selection criteria but not provided the detailed worked examples required by the guidance provided to applicants in the application pack?

The above may be due to oversight, mistakes or form-fatigue and it may well be appropriate to contact the applicant to explore the gaps. An annexe to this guidance provides a list of examples that may help selection panels reach a decision.

In every case, decisions to request or not to request further information must be directly related to the written contents of applications and to the publicised criteria for the role. As with shortlisting decisions, panel members' prior knowledge of candidates can not be taken into account.

How can equality be protected?

This new approach is intended to enable more applicants to reach the interview stage.

In every case, selection panels should exercise judgment and common sense in coming to their decisions to ask applicants for more information. Panels must ensure that they record, in writing, their reasons for deciding to ask for more information. Equally, panels must record, in writing, their reasons not to request further information from applicants. The reasons set out for asking some applicants to provide additional information and not others must be justifiable and clearly linked to:

- the knowledge and skills required, and
- the contents of the application form

The selection panel is responsible for deciding where the line sits between applicants who will and applicants who won't be asked to provide further information. In doing so, panels must give consideration to skills and knowledge gained from non-traditional career paths.

What will applicants be asked to provide?

Applicants should not be asked to resubmit their application. This is unlikely to result in any more relevant information being provided. The following guidance may help.

- The panel chair should write to the applicant referring to the specific areas of the application that the panel felt didn't provide enough information to invite to interview.



- The letter to the applicant must not include leading questions. It should indicate the criteria against which limited information was provided.
- The letter should encourage the applicant to be more explicit and to provide examples of how their skills and knowledge meet the criteria. The letter should refer the applicant again to the guidance for applicants in the application pack.
- Applicants must be asked to provide the requested information in writing by a certain date.
- Care should be taken not to give the impression to applicants who are asked to provide further information that they will definitely be invited to interview.

If you need help to decide whether or not an application merits seeking further information, please contact me for an informal discussion. It will always be the selection panel's responsibility to decide who should be asked to provide further information. It may be helpful to discuss your own or other panel member's questions or concerns before coming to that decision.

Ian Bruce
May 2009

ANNEXE

Examples of when it may or may not be appropriate to seek further information

When it may be appropriate to seek further information

1. Here is an example criterion, *“Ability to inspire and lead a board in order that it discharges its statutory and corporate governance obligations”*

If an applicant provides one or more good worked examples of leading a board which has effectively discharged its statutory and corporate governance obligations but fails to make reference to his or her inspirational qualities, the panel may wish to gather further information.

2. If the criteria for the role are clearly interrelated and the applicant answers all but one well, it may be reasonable to seek further information in relation to the one “poor” answer. This is particularly the case when several criteria are listed as essential. For example, an individual may have provided one or more detailed worked examples at the start of their form to demonstrate their, *“Ability to inspire and lead a board in order that it discharges its statutory and corporate governance obligations”*. If the same applicant then fails to provide detailed worked examples against a criterion towards the end of the form to demonstrate, *“A well developed understanding of the corporate governance obligations of a business”*, the panel may feel that it’s worth checking to see if the applicant has that knowledge.
3. Here is an example criterion, *“A well developed understanding of the corporate governance obligations of a business”*

If an individual advises that they have successfully chaired the audit committee of a significant plc over a sustained period, but does not provide detailed examples of what is or was involved in that, then the panel may wish to check if the applicant has the necessary knowledge.

4. Following on from the last example, an individual may have cited their work in successfully chairing the audit committee of one or more significant plcs in answer to a desirable criterion. Such a desirable criterion might, for example, be seeking financial or risk management knowledge. Limited statements provided in answer to a desirable criterion can be used to justify the panel’s decision to seek further information about an essential criterion.
5. Consider the criterion, *“Ability to communicate effectively with a range of audiences both in writing and in speech”*. It may appear from the answers across the applicant’s form that they are a professional communicator whose written works have been frequently published and who has been asked to give talks to some significant audiences. The panel may believe it appropriate to seek further information on the applicant’s communication skills to demonstrate that the criterion is fully met.
6. At times, the role or position held may be one known and understood by all selection panel members. In answer to a criterion seeking the ability to think strategically, an

individual may state that they were the chief executive of a significant plc. for an extended period. The panel may wish to ask for further information.

Other examples might include:

- A General Practitioner may have provided very limited information in relation to a criterion seeking knowledge of local healthcare. The panel may wish to approach this person for more information as it is commonly accepted that GPs have knowledge of local healthcare issues.
- A volunteer hospital visitor and fundraiser may have provided very limited information in relation to a criterion seeking the ability to engage positively and openly with patients and/or the public. The panel may wish to approach this person for more information.

When it **may not** appropriate to seek further information

1. An individual simply paraphrases the criterion. For example, against the criterion, *“Understanding of incentive arrangements and how to incentivise senior management to deliver and exceed stretching business targets”* an answer such as, “I have worked with incentive arrangements and targets” would not in and of itself merit an approach for further information.
2. An individual simply states the positions that they have held and provides no supplementary information or context. For example, “I was a chief executive from 2002 to 2004” may not, in and of itself, be considered a demonstration of the *“Ability to inspire and lead a board in order that it discharges its statutory and corporate governance obligations”*.

The criterion is an important consideration for the panel when deciding whether a job title or a position held on its own merits a request for further information from the applicant.

Other information provided in the first application form such as

- the context in which the individual was working
- the period spent in a given post (be that in a professional capacity or in an unpaid capacity) and
- the responsibilities involved

should also be taken into account by the panel when coming to its decision.

3. An individual provides one or more personal opinions on what represents good or best practice in relation to a criterion as opposed to providing information. For example, “I believe that openness and honesty are central to good governance” would not demonstrate *“A well developed understanding of the corporate governance obligations of a business”* and would not merit an approach for further information.