



Northern Ireland

Public Services

Ombudsman

Recruitment & Selection Policy and Procedure

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PART A - POLICY

1. PURPOSE

The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman ('NIPSO') is an equal opportunities employer and is committed to providing equality of opportunity to all applicants for employment. We will not discriminate unlawfully against any job applicant and all applications for employment will be considered and appointments made on the basis of merit.

In addition to the merit principle NIPSO is committed to the fundamental principles of fairness, impartiality, openness, respect and integrity, in ensuring that the best person is appointed in any recruitment exercise. This also contributes to improved organisational performance and development. Together these principles signal NIPSO's commitment to providing equality of opportunity in employment.

The purpose of this policy is to ensure that practices and procedures do not directly or indirectly discriminate against individuals on the grounds of gender, including pregnancy and maternity, gender reassignment, marital or civil partnership status, having or not having dependants, religious beliefs, political opinion, race, ethnic origin, colour or nationality, political opinion, sexual orientation, disability, age, Trade Union membership or non membership or criminal records.

A failure to observe the principles, practices and procedures set out in this Policy may result in disciplinary action if, after a full investigation of the matter, an individual or group of individuals are found to have disregarded or breached these arrangements.

2. SCOPE

This policy and procedure applies to all recruitment, selection and appointments made by NIPSO.

3. RECRUITMENT PLANNING

Once it has been identified there is a requirement for a new post (or posts), NIPSO will consider the following:

- The duties and responsibilities of the post, and the skills and qualifications required to carry out the post. This will be set out in the form of a job description and person specification;
- Why the post is required;
- Whether the post needs to be filled temporarily or permanently, and why;
- Whether the post is to be filled in an acting up capacity, and why;
- The level at which the role is to be recruited and if a job evaluation is required;
- The terms and conditions associated with the post, and are they consistent with similar roles within NIPSO.

4. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

A systematic, fair and objective recruitment and selection policy and procedure, developed inline with best practice and compliant with all equal opportunities and data protection legislation, will be based on the following core principles:

- every individual appointed will be selected on merit on the basis of fair and open competition;

- job opportunities will be advertised widely;
- all advertisements will include a statement to the effect that NIPSO is an Equal Opportunity employer, committed to the fair and equal treatment of all those seeking employment;
- assistance will be given by way of reasonable adjustments, where needed, to job applicants who are disabled;
- affirmative action measures will be taken where necessary to attract more applicants from under-represented groups; and
- procedures, policies and practices are avoided which could unlawfully directly or indirectly discriminate.

5. MERIT PRINCIPLE

Appointment of the best person for the post, assessed against job related selection criteria, is the fundamental principle underlying all current employment legislation and it is incorporated in this procedure.

In making appointments using the merit principle, NIPSO will:

- identify job related criteria including essential and where applicable desirable job related criteria which are not directly or indirectly discriminatory on any unlawful ground unless the criterion reflects a genuine operational requirement of the job or is otherwise objectively justified;
- apply such criteria fairly and consistently at all stages of selection in a logical and reasonable manner;
- ensure all applicants are treated fairly, equally and with respect;
- agree and record the weighting of each aspect of assessment considered relevant to the identified selection criteria;
- ensure that shortlisting and interviewing panels are trained in competency-based interviewing and non-discriminatory selection techniques;
- ensure that proceedings of selection panels are held in confidence, subject only to the need to disclose information and/or documents as necessary to assist in the resolution of any complaint; and
- record the assessments and decisions of members of shortlisting and interviewing panels and all those in attendance at such panels and retain such records for a period of not less than 3 years.

6. DISABLED APPLICANTS

In order to comply with our obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 reasonable adjustments may be made to some or all of the procedures and practices provided for in this policy if necessary in order to remove any disadvantages which they may cause for any applicant who has a disability. .

7. AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

It may be appropriate to take lawful affirmative action in order to implement a commitment to promoting equality of opportunity in a recruitment exercise if there is a under representation of employees from a particular group of potential applicants. Affirmative action in the context of this policy and procedure means the adoption of practices that promote equality of opportunity and which encourage fair participation. Where appropriate an affirmative action statement may be included in an advertisement in order to encourage applicants from any under represented group or groups. However, all appointments will be made on the basis of merit.

8. EXCEPTIONS TO PUBLICLY ADVERTISED VACANCIES

All vacancies will be advertised publicly with the exception of Acting-Up arrangements or where providing Internal Opportunities for the development of NIPSO staff. A vacancy may be treated as an internal opportunity in any one of the following circumstances:-

- Where NIPSO considers it appropriate to accommodate a part-time employee who wishes to increase their hours;
- To offer alternative employment to an employee at risk of redundancy or to avoid a potential redundancy situation;
- To re-deploy a disabled employee to a vacant post in order to comply with the duty to make reasonable adjustments under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

9. RECRUITMENT AGENCIES

Agencies may be used where NIPSO have a need to recruit temporary staff on a short-term basis urgently and the usual open advertising process highlighted above cannot meet that urgent need. NIPSO may also use agencies where there is an uncertainty about the funding associated with a post(s).

All contact with recruitment agencies should be undertaken by HR and only agencies which can meet the needs of the organisation should be used.

Recruitment agency staff who have worked for NIPSO for 6 months or more may apply for a fixed term internal vacancy.

10. TRAINING OF PANEL MEMBERS

Training as recommended by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland will be provided for all participants on shortlisting and interviewing panels and no person shall participate unless he/she has undertaken the training.

11. DATA PROTECTION AND CONFIDENTIALITY

All those involved in the recruitment and selection process must ensure they observe data protection obligations and obligations of confidentiality in the fulfilment of their duties under this policy and procedure. All records should be kept confidential and retained in accordance with this policy and procedure and the General Data Protection Regulation 2018. NIPSO will comply with its obligations under the above regulations to provide information on request to individuals who make a request.

12. POLICY REVIEW

This policy will be reviewed regularly from the date of implementation and in light of best practice and changes in legislation.

PART B – RECRUITMENT & SELECTION PROCEDURE

All recruitment and selection will be carried out systematically and objectively. The Procedure set out below must be followed when a vacancy arises.

1. AUTHORISATION OF A VACANCY

In advance of the recruitment process all vacancies, whether temporary, permanent, full time or part time, including internal and acting up vacancies, must first be approved by the Ombudsman.

When a post becomes vacant it should not be automatically assumed that the post is to be re-filled. It may be possible for the organisation to absorb the loss through re-organisation or re-allocation of duties. As such, it will ultimately be the decision of the Ombudsman, taking account of the views of the relevant director and other members of SMT, as to whether or not a position will be re-filled.

Upon the authorisation of a vacancy, the following should be agreed;

- the background, duties and responsibilities of the post (job description)
- the advertisement media to be used and the timescales for the process;
- the qualifications, skills, experience, abilities and knowledge which, based on the job description, are essential for the post and any other criteria which might be deemed desirable (person specification); and
- any additional assessment exercise to be used if applicable in the selection process and, if applicable, whether the assessment exercise is to be used as part of the shortlisting process and/or the interview process, and, if so, how it should be weighted.

Where the vacancy relates to an existing post the current job description for the post will be reviewed and either approved and confirmed or amended to ensure that it is up to date, meaningful and accurately reflects the duties of the post.

The language used in job descriptions will be clear, simple and non-discriminatory and the criteria contained in the person specification will reflect the requirements of the role. There will be no criterion which could cause unlawful direct discrimination or indirect discrimination, unless it is necessary in order to reflect a genuine occupational qualification for the post or is otherwise objectively justified.

2. RECRUITMENT TIMETABLE

Once approved, every effort will be made to meet the requirements of individual teams and the exigencies of the service in the timely filling of vacancies within NIPSO.

When scheduling and planning work, NIPSO staff should take account of the approximate timescales outlined below and that meeting these timescales depends on the timely development and agreement of the various items of recruitment documentation.

The following timescales are approximate and are applicable from the date of approval of the vacancy:

Preparation of recruitment documents	2 weeks
Advertisement	Advertisement 'open' for 2 weeks minimum
Shortlisting	ASAP upon closing date, within 1 week
Interviews	Need to supply 1 full week's notice to candidates
Offer	ASAP upon conclusion of interviews
Notice/pre-employment checks	Minimum of four weeks

From the date of approval, it is anticipated that the recruitment and selection process will take between two and three months to complete, depending upon the time of year and availability of panel members together with other organisational priorities and commitments.

3. RECRUITMENT ADVERTISING

NIPSO aims to attract a diverse range of applicants. The key objective in publicly advertising vacancies is to encourage applications representative of the entire community, maximising the chance of appointing the best possible person for the job. While the recruitment media may change depending on a number of factors (for instance the level or the specialism of the post), NIPSO will aim to advertise as broadly as possible, reflecting both the commitment to our Equal Opportunities Policy.

Generally, this will involve advertising in at least one Northern Ireland regional newspaper and on a widely used recruitment website such as NIJobfinder.co.uk. The NIPSO website will also be used for advertising all publicly advertised vacancies. In certain circumstances, the organisation will give consideration to utilising local media. For specialist posts, a specialist publication media also may be used.

In an effort to control recruitment costs and where there are a number of posts to be filled, HR may request the postponement of advertising of a post to enable the grouping together of as many posts as possible. This will only be done where practicable and where it is felt that there will be minimal adverse impact on service delivery.

All staff will be notified via internal email by HR of any vacancies which arise and all employees on maternity leave or long-term sick leave will be notified, either in writing or by e-mail while absent from the workplace.

The use of external recruitment agencies should only be done so in accordance guidelines in Part A section 9 of this policy. Likewise, if an internal vacancy is advertised or the post is to be filled through acting up then the guidelines within Part A section 8 of this policy should be considered.

4. APPLICATIONS

Applicants interested in an advertised position within NIPSO will be able to download the following information or it can be provided (by email or hard copy):

- a copy of the advertisement/trawl notice;
- an applicant pack;
- an application form; and
- an equal opportunities monitoring questionnaire.

The applicant pack provides detailed and comprehensive information which provides candidates with the following information:

- NIPSO's background, values, purpose and strategic objectives;
- guidance on the selection process, including an indicative timetable;
- contact details for HR;
- advice on completing the application form;
- a Job Description (Job Title, Reports to, Location, Job Purpose, Key Areas of Responsibility);
- a Person Specification (developed from the Job Description, competency based and containing eligibility, essential and desirable criteria as applicable); and
- a brief summary of main terms and conditions of employment.

The same information will be available to all applicants to ensure that everyone is treated consistently and fairly. Where applicable, relevant information will also be made available in alternative formats on request to meet the needs of disabled applicants.

It is anticipated that the provision of this information will allow potential applicants to make informed decisions as to their suitability for the post and to prepare their applications.

5. APPLICATION FORMS

All persons who wish apply for employment with NIPSO must complete our standard application form in response to an advertised job vacancy. CV's should not be accepted.

All application forms will include a section which invites disabled applicants to indicate any relevant effects of their disabilities and to suggest adjustments which might help them to overcome any disadvantages they might expect to encounter in the recruitment process.

All application forms submitted will be checked to see if any disabled applicant has indicated that he/she has any special requirements or are requesting any reasonable adjustments during the selection process. If any such requirements or adjustments are needed, then this will be noted at an early stage so that sufficient time is available to plan and make the appropriate arrangements. Where practicable, applicants will be contacted to obtain further information.

6. MONITORING

NIPSO are obliged by law to monitor the community background and gender of our job applicants and employees. All persons who request a job application form will be sent our separate equal opportunities monitoring form as well.

All monitoring information will be processed separately from application forms and will not be disclosed to or the content revealed by any person to those responsible for shortlisting or interview.

All information contained in the monitoring forms will be treated with confidence and the forms stored securely.

7. COMPOSITION OF SELECTION PANELS

All panel members should receive training on NIPSO recruitment and selection procedures and Equal Opportunities Policy, non-discriminatory selection techniques and employment legislation, including the Equality Commission's guidance.

Every endeavour will be made to ensure that shortlisting and interview panels as far as practicable, are comprised of persons of different genders and community background. In arranging a shortlisting and interview panel due consideration will be given to the 'balance' of the panel in all respects, bearing in mind the need to progress appointments, the individual's availability to participate at each stage and the skills and knowledge necessary to assist with the selection process.

As far as possible the same panel members should complete all stages of the recruitment and selection process. Where it is not possible for the same individuals to be involved throughout the selection process, reasons for the change should be noted. This, however, should only occur in exceptional circumstances.

The following principles will generally be followed in relation to the composition of selection panels:-

- The panel identified must include at least one member with recognised competence in the core areas for the post to be filled;
- The Chairperson, will be decided by the panel, but does not have to be the most senior person on the panel, but rather can be someone with direct line management or involvement with the post. ;
- Where practicable, at least one panel member should be from a different team to the post being advertised;
- In the circumstances where it is deemed appropriate NIPSO may use an external panel member(s) Where external panel members are used, NIPSO will still aim to meet the requirements of this policy in relation to the gender and community background of panel members. External panel members who have not already received appropriate training about fair, non-discriminatory recruitment methods will be provided this by NIPSO in advance of the panel meeting. All panel members must commit to making themselves available for both shortlisting and interviews. Using the timetables illustrated on page 5, these dates will be agreed with all panel members at the beginning of the process;
- HR will provide support and oversee the process, ensuring consistency and fairness and will, where appropriate or deemed necessary, attend with the shortlisting panel and during interview.

In the case of an emergency where a panel member cannot attend shortlisting the process will be deferred until a future date, unless a suitable alternative panel member can be sourced.

Where a panel member has attended shortlisting but cannot attend the interviews, a suitable alternative panel member will be sourced. This person will be fully briefed by HR in advance of the interviews. In certain circumstances it may be appropriate to postpone the interviews to a later date when all panel members are available.

All panel members must make a declaration, at shortlisting, of any existing conflicts of interest. The panel will then make a decision as to whether or not it is appropriate to proceed or if a replacement should be sought.

A panel member shall not solicit any person for an appointment within NIPSO. Any canvassing of officers directly or indirectly in connection with an appointment will automatically disqualify the candidate.

8. SHORTLISTING

Shortlisting will be completed as soon as possible following the closing date for receipt of applications.

Shortlisting is an initial assessment of the applicants based solely on the information contained in their application forms. The purpose is to decide which applicants meet the essential and/or desirable job criteria so that they may be given more in-depth consideration at the next stage of the process.

The panel will meet and before viewing the application forms will agree:

- the nature and extent all essential and, if applicable, any desirable criteria that will be applied;
- the weighting to be given to each aspect of the selection process;
- whether or not an assessment test is to be used and if so will contribute to the overall score or will be used purely as a shortlisting tool;
- interview questions and scoring system; and
- the weighting of interview questions should there be a tie-break situation in the final selection of a candidate and/or reserve candidates.

Prior to commencement of shortlisting the agreed assessment criteria will be recorded. The criteria that are applied are those that are set out in the person specification for the job. The essential criteria must be applied always. The selection panel will decide whether any or all of the desirable criteria will also be applied.

The panel members will examine each application against the agreed assessment criteria based solely on the information provided in the application form. All NIPSO application forms are designed and formatted so that applicants must demonstrate, through the use of examples, how they meet each criterion.

HR will provide guidance to panel members on matters such as equivalent academic qualifications and other qualifications as required. In doing so, HR will rely on the qualifications guidance available on the gov.uk website. If relying on equivalent qualifications, the onus is on the applicant to provide evidence of this.

It is possible that panel members may know, or be aware of the work carried out by an applicant for employment. This is more likely to occur where the candidate is an existing member of NIPSO staff. It is essential the panel member does not allow any pre-existing knowledge to influence his/her decision making at shortlisting or at interview, in either a positive or negative way. To that effect, no inferences should be drawn or assumptions made as only the information provided by the applicant and contained within the application form should influence the decision of the panel.

Each decision will be recorded by the panel Chair. The record must include a clear explanation as to the reason why some applicants are unsuccessful, other applicants are deemed suitable and any matters of clarification or comments relevant to their decisions.

All panel members must be in agreement with the final shortlist of applicants and will then be asked to sign the shortlisting grid before the closure of the meeting.

9. ADDITIONAL METHODS OF ASSESSMENT

In order to examine criteria which cannot be assessed by interview, or are best measured by a means other than by interview or to apply additional weight to a more pertinent criteria, the panel may examine other possible methods of assessment to use in addition to the shortlisting and interview.

Any assessments and tests used should:

- be designed to reflect the grade/role of the post concerned;
- provide relevant, reliable and valid assessment data of the applicants' ability to perform the duties of the post; and
- have no discriminatory impact on any of the statutory equality groups.

In circumstances where a large number of applications for a particular role are received NIPSO reserve the right to introduce an additional test.

Assessment tests may be purchased from professional organisations or designed internally. The effectiveness of the tests used will be reviewed and NIPSO will monitor their use to ensure no adverse impact on the designated groups.

Examples of possible additional methods of assessment include word processing tests; unseen scenarios; in-tray exercises; psychometric tests; reasoning examinations; seen and unseen presentations and assessment centres.

Assessment scores may be used in conjunction with and additional to the interview scores or may, as in the case of a prepared presentation or assessment centre where there is an additional stage of the process, be used to select candidates for final interview. How the scores will be used should be decided by the panel at the shortlisting stage.

10. INTERVIEWING

Invitation to Interview

Those candidates who are successful after shortlisting and or assessment will be invited to attend an interview and will ideally be provided with a minimum of 7 working days notice of the interview date. Candidates who were unsuccessful will also be informed in writing. Both successful and unsuccessful applicants will be processed at the same time.

HR will confirm with panel members the dates and the interview schedule when all arrangements have been made.

Pre-Interview Meeting

Prior to interview the panel will meet and agree a structured format for the interviews. The panel will also agree suitable questions which directly and clearly correspond to the selection criteria set out in the person specification and are non-discriminatory. All interview questions must be developed from the criteria for the post and must be targeted at obtaining evidence to support decision-making about the most suitable applicant. The questions should not seek to obtain the following kinds of personal information about the applicant's:-

- Religious belief or political opinion;
- Ethnicity, nationality or national origins;
- Age or date of birth;
- Sexual orientation;
- Health or disability;
- Marital status or family status or whether the applicant has children or plans to have children.

Panel members may have a preference for asking a particular question, for example an interviewer may have a certain specialism which is covered in one of the questions so it maybe appropriate for them to ask this question. Panel members should also discuss and decide how they will score and weight the answers to questions and agree on the interview pass mark i.e. the minimum score expressed as a percentage which a candidate much achieve to be deemed appointable, for example, 60%.

A standardised interview assessment sheet will be prepared against which applicants will be scored.

At this stage panel members should be familiar with the questions assigned to them.

Interviews

The panel should arrange to meet no later than half an hour before the start of the first interview to go over the process one final time. This will ensure that all the relevant documentation is present and in order and that all the panel members are agreed on the questions to be asked and by whom.

Before the interview commences, the information provided on the application form by the applicant will be checked for verification purposes.

The aim of the interview is to obtain from the applicant enough additional information to enable panel members to assess applicants accurately against the criteria.

The interviewing panel is a key element of NIPSO's recruitment and selection process and it is necessary for all participants to promote NIPSO as an employer of sound reputation for fair and lawful practice in employment matters.

It should be remembered that a positive and professional atmosphere, created by an introduction to the more formal stage of the interview, is conducive to good interviewing practice. Interviewers should, at all times, be aware of their non-verbal communication. The Chairperson should welcome the candidate and introduce themselves and the rest of the panel. At this stage the Chairperson should also briefly describe the mechanics of the interview process. For instance, the number of questions to be asked, the relevant panel member asking the questions, how much time they have been allocated for each question response and who is responsible for note-taking.

While it is the responsibility of the candidate to manage their own time throughout the interview, they may be prompted or stopped by the panel if they have exceeded the allocated time. Effective time management is a critical aspect of ensuring that all candidates receive fair and equal treatment, providing applicants with the same opportunity to demonstrate their skills and experience.

In addition to the core questions panel members may need to probe candidates for additional role-related information and this can be achieved through the use of supplementary, role-related questions.

It is important for panel members to remember that, at this stage, they are simply recording in detail the candidate's responses and not scoring the answers against the criteria. Interviewers should ensure that all notes taken are in ink only and are clear and comprehensive and sufficiently legible to allow for meaningful recall in the event of proceedings and relate only to the responses provided by the candidate.

At the conclusion of the interview, the Chairperson should close the interview as follows:

- advise the candidate that the interview is complete;
- give him/her an opportunity to ask any questions;
- advise him/her about the next steps in the procedure; and
- thank him/her for attending and wish him/her a safe onward journey.

Interview Scoring

- Directly following each interview, panel members should independently assess and score each question. When all panel members have completed their scoring the Chair will then record each panel members' scores in turn, before facilitating a discussion among the panel to reach a consensus score.
- The consensus scores for individual questions will be used as the final panel score for each question and shall be totalled to arrive at the final score for the interview. This final score shall be calculated as a percentage of the available score and recorded by the Chair. Each 'Interview Summary Assessment Form' should be signed and dated by both the panel and the Chair, who before signing should also check the scoring calculations.
- Candidates will then be ranked by their score, from first to last, with the candidate ranked first appointed providing they have met or exceeded the interview pass mark.
- If there has been an agreed reserve list, candidates that meet the pass mark, but are not the top ranked candidate will be placed on the reserve list in the appropriate ranked order.
- Where there are candidates with identical scores, they will be separated by the method determination at the shortlisting stage of the process..

11. RESERVE LISTS

Following the acceptance by the successful applicant(s), the other applicants will be informed that they have been unsuccessful and advised, where appropriate, if the organisation wishes to retain their application on a reserve list and the period for which this list will remain valid. Normally, a reserve list of successful applicants will be kept open for no longer than 12 months from the date on which all applicants are notified of the outcome of the interview unless there are clear practical reasons for extending that period. In exceptional circumstances, an extended date for a reserve list may be approved by the Ombudsman but this shall not exceed twenty-four months. Appointments from the reserve list will always be subject to available funding.

If the same vacancy arises during this period, the post may be offered to applicants on the reserve list. The 'same vacancy' is defined as a post with the same Job Description, Person Specification and on the same salary scale.

12. OFFER OF EMPLOYMENT

The successful applicant will normally be offered the position in writing within 5 working days from the date the final interview taking place.

All NIPSO offers of employment are conditional and subject to successful pre-employment checks and the successful applicant will be required to:

- provide documentation to confirm their identity;
- provide evidence of their right to work in the United Kingdom;
- provide documentation to verify information already provided on the application form, eg, qualifications, professional registration, driving licence, etc;
- complete a basic AccessNI Check, which the successful candidate must obtain and provide evidence of, the cost of which will be reimbursed upon appointment;
- complete a medical questionnaire; and
- provide referee details, one of which should be their current or most recent employer. If a panel member happens to be a referee, then the candidate will be asked to provide an alternative referee.

As such, the successful candidate will receive a conditional offer of employment immediately following the selection process together with a written statement containing the main terms and conditions of employment and an acceptance slip. Candidates will be informed following the completion of all employment checks if these have been deemed satisfactory and that their offer is confirmed.

13. PAY

NIPSO use the NICS pay scales when determining the remuneration for each post. The normal expectation is that the successful applicant will commence on the first incremental point of the advertised pay scale, as appropriate to the grade of the job.

A starting salary higher than the scale minimum will only be considered where appointing to the scale minimum would be inappropriate and this decision will be made as detailed below. In any case, the starting salary must be as close to the scale minimum as possible. An offer of a higher salary should have the express agreement of the Ombudsman and consider:

- the knowledge, skills and experience of the appointee;
- the level at which the appointee operated in previous roles;
- the need to avoid creating anomalies in pay relativities between new starters and existing staff;
- the need to give new appointees the opportunity to demonstrate their capability to undertake the full range of the duties of the post; and
- the current salary of the appointee.

14. CANDIDATE FEEDBACK

All decisions arising from each stage of the recruitment and selection process and the corresponding information and documentation are confidential. A panel member should not, under any circumstances, provide feedback directly to a candidate either during or after the process.

Any candidate may request feedback upon completion of the procedure. All requests for feedback should be made to HR for processing and discussion with the Chairperson of the panel.

In the event that a candidate makes a request to a panel member for feedback, that request should be referred to HR who will discuss the request with the Chairperson of the panel and in conjunction with the Chairperson prepare and provide a response to the candidate.

15. RECORD KEEPING/CUSTODY OF RECORDS

All sensitive personal information will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation 2018 and stored appropriately and retained in accordance with the NIPSO Retention and Disposal Schedule and for only as long as is necessary. All other documents will be retained for at least 3 years.