

Oireachtas Joint Committee on Public Service Oversight and Petitions

Invitation to address the Joint Committee as regards how the Public Appointments Service manages recruitment panels

9 December 2015

Opening Statement by Ms. Fiona Tierney, Chief Executive Officer, Public Appointments Service

Check Against Delivery

Chairperson, Committee Members,

I would like to thank the Committee for its invitation to attend here today and to discuss how the Public Appointments Service (PAS) manages recruitment panels. By way of assisting the Committee, I would like to read this opening statement which briefly explains the functions of PAS, sets out some background detail as to our current levels of activity, explains the general process regarding the management of recruitment panels and outlines how PAS makes decisions as regards the operation of specific recruitment panels.

Functions of the Public Appointments Service (PAS)

The Public Appointments Service was established under the Public Service Management (Recruitment and Appointments) Act 2004. This Act also established the Commission for Public Service Appointments which acts as the licence-granting authority for relevant public service recruitment bodies. The Commission is the regulator overseeing relevant public sector appointment processes and also publishes statutory Codes of Practice governing recruitment process to which licensees, such as PAS, must adhere.

Under Sections 33 and 34 of the Act, PAS was established to act as the centralised recruitment, assessment and selection body for the Civil Service and for other public service bodies. Under the Act, PAS is empowered to carry out all the procedures necessary to undertake the recruitment, assessment and selection of suitable candidates for appointment and in so doing to determine the criteria for selection, and the form of selection process to be adopted in accordance with the principles of the Act and the CPSA Code of Practice.

PAS is independent in the exercise of its functions and in recognition of this independence, is in receipt of its own Vote, for which I am the Accounting Officer. Currently, PAS has a staff of 127 civil servants (115 FTEs) and has a budget for 2015 of €8.9m.

Current activity levels

PAS undertakes recruitment activities across a wide range of roles and on behalf of a diverse range of public bodies. Currently, PAS recruits for the civil service, the Health Service Executive, local authorities, an Garda Síochána and a wide range of other public bodies. In recruiting for these organisations, PAS recruits to:

- Top and senior management positions,
- Senior specialist positions,
- Medical consultant positions,
- Middle management positions,
- Garda Síochána Trainee
- Graduate and technical positions, and
- Clerical and other entry positions.

By way of indicating current activity levels, during 2015, PAS will have run 430 recruitment campaigns, will have processed c.55,000 applications, interviewed c.7,600 people and will have recommended c.4,300 people for appointment.

In addition, since November 2014, PAS also has responsibility for the operation of the revised process for making appointments to State Boards.

As a public service body, PAS is committed to high standards of merit-based recruitment practice and to maintaining a high level of compliance with the CPSA Codes of Practice, as mentioned earlier. In addition, PAS is very conscious of the general requirements on public bodies to act in ways that are fair, consistent and in accordance with good administrative practice.

PAS operates within a strict legal and regulatory framework to safeguard the core principles of civil service employment which have played such an important role since the foundation of the State in ensuring that successive Governments have benefitted from the advice and support of an impartial, committed and politically-neutral civil and public service - often during periods of acute economic and political challenge.

PAS prides itself on the delivery of a client-focused and candidate-centric recruitment and selection service. The values underpinning our work are those of openness, transparency and the making of merit-based appointments. In addition, PAS has a strong track record of independence and integrity in its work for both clients and candidates.

One of the challenges for PAS in running a complex and multi-level recruitment service on the scale indicated above, is to ensure that the principle of fairness is maintained while also recognising that a “one size fits all” process is unlikely to be appropriate across a recruitment landscape encompassing, for example, Secretary Generals to Consultant Psychiatrists to Meteorologists to Garda Trainees.

General process regarding the management of recruitment panels

PAS has a process in place for the management of recruitment panels. Very briefly the process is as follows:

1. A recruitment competition is organised and advertised based on client request and appropriate sanction being in place. The vast majority of recruitment competitions are ‘open’ competitions, by this is meant applications are invited from any candidate who believes they meet the selection criteria.
2. A “panel” is formed following the final/competitive stage of a selection process – the intention to form a panel will have been

communicated to candidates during the advertising stage of the process

3. Placement on a panel is not a guarantee of appointment to a position.
4. PAS adheres to the highest standards of confidentiality in managing candidate's personal data, and panels are confidential
5. When a suitable vacancy arises, candidates must then be assessed against all relevant criteria for actual appointment – this process is known as “clearance”.
6. Acceptance and/or rejection of an offer of appointment will generally lead to a candidate being removed from the panel.
7. Panels of suitable candidates are most commonly established for roles where multiple appointments are anticipated.
8. Panels are dimensioned based on expected demand for appointments. While adequate size of panel is important, so too is ensuring panels are not so large that people feel they are left languishing on panels with no reasonable prospect of appointment.
9. Short panels may also be formed for more specialised, senior or “one-off” type appointments in order to provide for the possibility of the first placed candidate rejecting the offer of appointment.
10. Typically, panels are active for 12 to 18 months and are normally closed when a newly-established panel supersedes unless particular circumstances of the campaign dictate otherwise.
11. In the interests of maintaining reasonable flexibility, there is not generally a predetermined closing date for a panel. The exception is some internal campaigns confined to civil/public servants where an expiry date would be set by civil service management and would be stated in the relevant circular.

How PAS makes decisions as regards the management of specific panels

As outlined earlier, PAS provides recruitment services across diverse categories of roles and positions and in doing so, liaises with a wide range

of employing authorities in a client focused, professional and confidential manner. Client expectations and demands require careful management in a resource constrained environment. Given this circumstance, PAS must carefully manage and schedule its work to meet the expectations of these stakeholders while also maintaining its compliance with the Codes of Practice and while also fulfilling its significant duties to candidates.

As Chief Executive, and licence holder, I am ultimately responsible for determining the lifecycle of panels having taken a range of relevant factors into account including:

- The level and specialisation of the post,
- Changes in the job or in eligibility requirements since a panel was formed,
- The resources invested in generating the panel,
- The number of people placed on the panel,
- The numbers appointed from, and remaining on, the panel,
- The age of the panel,
- The number of new potential candidates entering the field since the panel was formed, and
- The degree of urgency in filling a position.

While there is a high degree of standardisation in PAS processes, I do not believe it would be appropriate to have a single operating template for all panels given the range, level and variety of positions being filled.

I am informed that the Civil Service Commissioners of Northern Ireland adopt a similar position in that 12 months is the general life of panels but that there are exceptions to this general rule whereby some panels have lasted significantly longer.

Where a candidate is unhappy with any aspect of his or her interaction with PAS, we have a number of routes through which we accept complaints and feedback. Our targets in relation to customer complaints are set out in our Customer Service Action Plan. I believe our record in responding to queries, feedback and complaints is a positive one and accords with our stated values and principles.

In the case of a candidate who is unhappy with any aspect of a campaign, there is a formal appeal procedure in accordance with the Sections 7 and 8 of the CPSA Code of Practice. Candidates are, of course, also at liberty to raise issues, as appropriate, with the Ombudsman, the Equality Tribunal, the Equality Authority, the Freedom of Information Commissioner, the Data Protection Commissioner or the Courts.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to assure the Committee that the Public Appointments Service is committed to high standards in all of its recruitment work, which includes the management of recruitment panels. Should there be any matters relating to panels which the Committee believes PAS should address by way of continuous improvement, I will certainly give these my full consideration.

I trust this statement is of assistance to the Committee and I am happy to discuss any issues arising with the Committee.

Ends