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22 March 2021

Dear Ms Anderson

The Scottish Government thanks you and your team for the Annual Applicant Survey 2019. The Scottish Government read the views of applicants with interest and noted that many of the key findings support the improvement approach set out in our Strategy and Action Plan for Public Appointments (2020-2022).

**Outreach and engagement**

The survey results consistently report that people are motivated to apply for public appointments because they feel their skills, knowledge and experience are a good fit for the role (90.29% in 2019). This is a welcome finding and reflects the central role that merit plays in the public appointments process.

It was helpful to see the finding that people under 50 are more likely to apply for a public appointment because of a desire for professional development. This information will feed into project work we have planned which will focus on younger people. It was also useful to see that 60% of respondents hear about appointments from the Scottish Government website and email updates. Much of our outreach has been carried out digitally due to the COVID restrictions, we will continue to promote all vacancies on our website, via email updates and our social media accounts.

**Application**

We were pleased to note the trend that 78.44% of respondents agree that the pack gives a clear understanding of how to apply for a role. It was also encouraging to note the four year trend that people find the application pack clear and that applications are straightforward to complete.

**Interview**

It is encouraging to see positive four year trends emerge, particularly that those who reach the interview stage have a good experience with more than 80% of respondents reporting that the panel handled the interview well or very well.

We were pleased to see that 70% of respondents who were interviewed reported the interview questions reflected the skills, knowledge and experience detailed in the criteria. The Scottish Government recognise that there is always room for improvement but we do not agree with the suggestion that new requirements might have been introduced at this final stage of assessment. Officials responsible for delivering the appointments process are absolutely clear that the introduction of new requirements would be a breach of the Code of Practice. In addition, 75% of public appointment rounds in 2019 had an Advisor from your office assigned to them, we are of the view that the risk of new requirements being introduced would be very low indeed.

**Feedback**

The Scottish Government agrees that feedback is important and provides feedback on request using the information generated by the selection panel against the selection criteria. The Scottish Government understand that people who receive feedback perceive the process to be fairer and that disabled people and ethnic minority people place a greater value on feedback compared to others. We are seeking to provide feedback to those groups as a priority as well as providing tailored advice, support and mentoring in advance of an application.

**Future actions**

Many of the comments from respondents have been raised directly with the Scottish Government either during our own outreach and engagement activities or in consultation with public body boards. The Scottish Government will take the following action:

**Increasing the representation of people from different socio-economic backgrounds**

The Scottish Government will investigate how to increase applications from people from lower income households. This will start with improving the way that socio-economic background and status is monitored within a new applicant tracking system.

The Scottish Government will continue to use learning from previous rounds and encourage public body boards, where appropriate, to broaden the appeal of their board vacancies and consider more minimal criteria or criteria that requires lived experience.

**Feedback that the website is clunky and difficult to use**

The Scottish Government has plans in place to replace the public appointments website and introduce a new applicant tracking system in 2021. This will deliver a much more intuitive and accessible system which will improve people’s experience of applying for an appointment. It will also deliver efficiencies for the administrators of public appointments.

**The length of time taken**

In 2019 the time taken for an appointment was on average 17.5 weeks. The Scottish Government aim to find ways to reduce this timescale by introducing new technology and finding new methods to enable greater efficiency. The Scottish Government is keen to run more joint rounds and so it was useful to see that 87% of respondents confirmed that advertising joint vacancies did not cause confusion.

**Checking the credentials of candidates**

The Scottish Government will introduce a new digital tool in June 2021 which will enable a security check of candidates who have been chosen by the Minister for appointment.

**Enhancing the message on fair and open recruitment**

We share your concern that 30% of respondents felt that the appointments process was not fair. We are keen to understand why this is and what actions Scottish Government could take to address this perception. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you or your team and identify actions to address this perception.

We note the low response rate to the survey (32% of applicants in 2019). You asked how best to increase the response rate and the Scottish Government is of the view that people may be more likely to respond if the survey was shorter. It may be useful to cut out some of the questions where the survey has returned consistent results for example:

* Applicants motivation to apply based on skills, knowledge and experience
* The value of clear adverts and application packs
* Positive experience of interviews
* The value that applicants place on feedback
* Trends on intention to apply again remains at around 50%.

The Scottish Government is alive to the feedback on these issues and the survey findings have informed our practice. The alternative is to keep the themes above but reduce the number of questions under each theme. The Scottish Government would find feedback on different methods of assessment helpful and would welcome more detail on how applicants perceive the fairness of the appointments process.

Yours sincerely

Helen Miller

Head of Public Appointments (Acting)