

Ethical Standards Commissioner

HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS ENTERPRISE: GOOD PRACTICE

A case study illustrating the steps taken by the Highlands and Islands Enterprise selection panel to align ministerial priorities to a successful outcome in 2025.



Effective selection panel

Strong, collaborative panel working, with a constructive and open chairing style that valued all contributions.



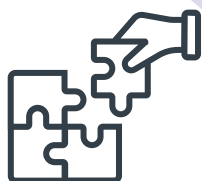
Collaboration with key stakeholders

Effective partnership with the Public Appointments Team, whose presence on interview day materially supported quality notes, adherence to Code requirements, and applicant feedback standards.



Alignment with Ministerial priorities

High quality applicant field, attributed to robust outreach, clear documentation, and alignment with Ministerial priorities regarding regional understanding.



Key learning focussed on a complex chair round

The panel identified several key insights of value for future appointments, including clarity around priorities, safeguarding Code compliance and creative assessment methods.

Background

This appointment round sought a new Chair for Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), a non-departmental public body of the Scottish Government responsible for social and economic development across the Highlands and Islands. HIE delivers on a broad strategic remit including community empowerment, innovation, inward investment, net zero transition, sector growth, digital connectivity and regional transformation projects.

At the time of this appointment round, HIE was working within a complex economic landscape, collaborating closely with national and regional partners including the Scottish Government, Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council, VisitScotland, local authorities, Business Gateway and others.

Given the breadth of HIE's mission and the scale of its influence, the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic expected the appointment process to identify a Chair who could demonstrate strong leadership, deep understanding of the region, and the ability to guide HIE through ongoing change and strategic opportunity. The appointment round ultimately achieved a successful outcome, securing a candidate who aligned closely with Ministerial expectations which were clearly communicated and understood by the panel from the outset.

Early Engagement

Succession planning was a notable strength in the early planning phase. The HIE board skills matrix was shared with and discussed by the panel, providing clarity on existing board capability and areas where new leadership capacity would add greatest value. This helped inform the panels initial thinking around the person specification, as well as ensuring that the criteria identified would be well aligned with future organisational needs.

The Deputy First Minister emphasised the importance of the successful candidate having a sound cultural understanding of the region, including its linguistic heritage and the role of Gaelic in the economy and community life. The panel reflected this priority directly in the recruitment pack, and in their assessment planning during the planning phase. The Minister also allowed the panel to refine the skills and knowledge criteria before finalising the person specification, giving them the flexibility to ensure an accurate match between the role and the region's future needs. In practice, the panel articulated the criteria relating to this as the following: Passion for the culture of the Highlands and Islands. The example indicators to assist applicants in their consideration of this criterion were as follows:

- clear understanding of the importance of Gaelic and Gaelic culture and its impact on the Highlands and Islands region;
- a deep understanding and experience of the issues affecting those living in urban, rural and island communities in the region.

This demonstrates the panel's awareness of the Minister's desire to ensure that the importance Gaelic was a key feature of the thinking when selecting a chair, and how they interpreted and defined this into a criterion for applicants.

Early Engagement Cont.

The panel worked together particularly well, and end of round reporting suggests that the panel chair fostered openness and early challenge, ensuring that all panel members and the Scottish Government's Public Appointments Team (PAT) had a shared understanding of the intended outcomes and expectations before the round began. This helped to shape a coherent and focused approach to planning and delivery.

Planning & Outreach

End of round reporting also suggests that the outreach and attraction strategy for this round was strong and well considered. This involved panel members engaging actively with the attraction planning, ensuring outreach included a wider set of groups than in previous rounds. Additional interest groups were added to the distribution list, broadening the reach of the opportunity. There was also discussion about the representation of faith groups to ensure a consistent and fair approach, and indeed the final communications strategy and list of organisations to contact included a range of faith groups, churches and organisations.

The round also benefited from the suggestion of an online engagement session for individuals considering an application, which was welcomed by the panel. There was a significant amount of early engagement work taken forward by HIE, which the panel considered to be highly effective, contributing significantly to the round attracting a large and varied field of applicants. A summary of this is included below



General Audience

HIE to issue news release in English and Gaelic (see lines under Messages, below) to local, regional and national media.

HIE to prepare short videos, with content in both English and Gaelic, to promote the opportunity through social media and on its website.

HIE to publish information, links to background documentation and videos on the Vacancies section of its website, with a direct link to the application pack on SG Public Appointments.

HIE social media channels (Facebook, X, LinkedIn) to promote recruitment in English and Gaelic, with links to web pages and videos.



Public and private sector partners

Letter from Chief Executive of HIE to counterparts among COHI members and Scottish agencies and NDPBs (eg SE, SOSE, NS, SEPA, BnaG etc). English and Gaelic versions needed.

HIE Communications team will send news release and comms messages to these partner organisations, for publication and sharing internally, on networks and on social channels.

HIE Communications team will send news release and comms messages to business and community organisations (eg Prosper, IoD, FSB, CLS) to share with members and on social channels.



Networks / Influencers

HIE Executive Office to identify and contact key membership organisations that can help promote interest, especially among under-represented groups (eg Changing the Chemistry; Women on Boards, and similar networks of people with disabilities and ethnic and other minorities).

Send comms messages to these groups for sharing with members and on social channels.

HIE Board members and staff will be encouraged to use their own social media channels, especially LinkedIn, to promote the recruitment exercise.

Planning & Outreach cont.

In summary, the recruitment pack, developed with Ministerial input, was well aligned with the strategic needs of the Highlands and Islands and clearly conveyed the community-centred nature of the role. The panel noted that this clarity did not narrow the potential field inappropriately but instead ensured that applicants could self-select effectively based on regional knowledge and motivation to serve. Along with a robust and well considered attraction strategy, 14 applications were received which is a higher number than typical for chair roles in public appointments which, in 2024, was 9.5 on average.

Assessment Methods

A strong feature of this round was the thoughtful design of assessment activities. The panel engaged in lengthy discussions about the criteria, with draft materials initially suggesting to include four priority criteria; however, the PAA intervened to highlight the burden this would place on applicants and the risk of making the process less accessible. The panel chair supported this advice, and the criteria were reduced back to three, ensuring fairness and clarity as well as reducing the burden on applicants, particularly at the application stage.

The interview process included:

- A short opening statement/presentation, designed to spark conversation and reveal candidates' strategic insight and leadership approach.
- A media exercise, which was recorded and reviewed by the panel during interview day. This provided valuable evidence on communication skills and judgement under pressure.

The assessment approach was described as fair, rigorous and appropriate for the seniority of the position in the end of round reporting received.

Applicant Survey

An applicant survey was carried out approximately one month after the announcement that an appointment had been made. The survey had a higher-than-average response rate at 30% although only 67% of responders provided demographic data. 100% of respondents felt that the applicant pack contained all the details needed to apply as well as feeling that the requirements of the role were clearly outlined. 100% felt that the time and effort to apply was reasonable, and 67% felt that the amount of information provided was just right. 100% also agreed that the application process was clear. Finally, 100% of respondents felt that the process was fully or partially fair and transparent. Due to the response rate, we must keep in mind that this is not necessarily a wholly representative view of those who applied. Despite this, the overarching response from applicants reflected a positive experience and suggests that the panel's efforts at clearly articulating and communicating the requirements of the role were successful.

Successes

Several aspects of this round demonstrated notable good practice:

- Strong, collaborative panel working, with a constructive and open chairing style that valued all contributions.
- Effective partnership with the Public Appointments Team, whose presence on interview day materially supported quality notes, adherence to Code requirements, and applicant feedback standards.
- Well designed assessment methods, including the presentation and media exercise, which gave deeper insight into real-world leadership behaviours.
- Focused, disciplined approach to criteria, safeguarding fairness and accessibility for applicants.
- High quality applicant field, attributed to robust outreach, clear documentation, and alignment with Ministerial priorities regarding regional understanding.

Key Learning: approaching complex chair rounds

The panel identified several key insights of value for future appointments. These included:

- Clarity of priorities matters: limiting priority criteria and resisting drift during drafting making the process fairer and more manageable.
- Active intervention early safeguarding Code compliance and ensuring consistent treatment across applicants.
- Creative assessment tools, such as a media exercise, adding depth and realism to the assessment process.

Outcome

The round resulted in a successful appointment consistent with Ministerial expectations, identifying a candidate who demonstrated a strong understanding of the Highlands and Islands region, experience relevant to HIE's strategic challenges, and the leadership capability required for the role. The panel were satisfied that the process had been robust, collaborative and well managed, leading directly to a high quality outcome.

The successful appointment was announced on 24 October 2025.

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/public-appointment-chair-appointed-to-the-board-of-highlands-and-islands-enterprise/>



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