



Simon Hart MP
Minister for Implementation
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Rt Hon Peter Riddle CBE
The Commissioner for Public Appointments
1 Horse Guards Road
London
SW1A 2HQ

Our reference: MFI/00114

5 November 2019

Dear Peter,

Thank you for your letter of 1 July to Oliver Dowden, enclosing a copy of your thematic review of the aim, set out in the Governance Code, that public appointments processes should be concluded within three months of a competition closing. Oliver and I are grateful to you for these and I have read both with interest.

As you rightly point out, customer care plays a crucial role in the reputation of public appointments, and in the way in which we retain and encourage a wide range of applicants. It is really important that we have a fair and open process, but also one which is timely and ensures that high-quality, diverse candidates are not put off by the length of time taken.

I note that your report shows that almost half (47%) of the surveyed appointments made during the period you examined over 2018-19 were within the aim. However, as you rightly point out, this means that half exceeded the three month aim set out in the Governance Code, although it is not clear from your report by what period of time this was in many cases.

I recognise that by drawing out the duration of our processes, we potentially risk putting off or losing good candidates. At a roundtable discussion Oliver Dowden held in the summer with representatives from the executive search firms we engage for some public appointments, a valuable point was however raised about the importance of retaining some degree of flexibility in our timelines, in order to adapt the process to accommodate the busy lives of many of our applicants. In those instances, not allowing that flexibility could also stifle diversity.

Your recommendation that the end of a competition is defined as the date at which candidates are informed of the outcome of a process is a pragmatic idea, and is likely to be a more accurate measure of the time elapsed, being unaffected by announcement delays. Most candidates would probably regard this point as being the conclusion of the process, rather than waiting for an announcement. However, the impact of such a change would actually be to allow for the competition to run for longer than is currently the case and could be seen as a purely statistical change.

In order to reduce the time actually taken by departments, I have asked my officials to prioritise best practice guidance for them on improving candidate care. This will include advice on planning campaigns, to ensure the best chance of a timely and smooth process. It can usefully

incorporate the points you make in your other recommendations around agreeing dates for sifts and interviews with panel members before campaigns launch, ensuring key parts of the appointments process do not take place during recess and conducting due diligence before interviews (noting that there may still be some occasions where not all of these are possible). I believe that the three month timescale should remain an aim, rather than a hard requirement, and that in addition to better advance planning, the focus of departments should be on ensuring that candidates are kept well-informed throughout the process. Requiring departments to inform your office when the three-month timescale is exceeded would require an amendment to the Governance Code and could be considered disproportionate. However, a move towards an electronic application system would allow automatic recording of the time taken in various stages and include an ability to identify when competitions were exceeding the three month aim.

In the meantime, officials will encourage departments to make greater use of the facility already available to record when candidates are informed of the outcome of a competition. This should, collectively, increase our understanding of whether the intention behind the three-month aim is being achieved. As you discussed with my predecessor on a number of occasions, the need to gather accurate data to inform sound assessments about the efficiency of the public appointments process and the diversity of those going through the process is vital. I know my officials have worked with your office to improve the accuracy of reporting across departments for the most recent financial year. As you know, a key objective of the government's refreshed Diversity Action Plan is to improve the consistency and reliability of the data that we hold about public appointments so we can see where we are making a difference and where further focus is needed.

I am grateful for the time and effort that you and your team put into producing this report, which is an important reminder to departments of the importance of good customer care throughout the appointments process. I am also grateful for your continuing commitment to ensuring that we encourage the best candidates from all walks of life to apply for Public Appointments and that we are not inadvertently disadvantaging or discouraging candidates through the process.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Simon Hart', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Simon Hart MP