THE COMMISSIONER FOR PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS

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Simon Hoare MP
Chair of the Public Administration
and Constitutional Affairs Committee

30 October 2026

By email only

Dear Simon

It was good to see you this week. Thank you for making the time to meet with me.

As we agreed during my pre-appointment hearing before your committee, I am writing to provide an update on my activities over the months following my formal appointment in July. You specifically asked me to outline my key findings and answer the question 'What should a good Commissioner be doing'.

My first priority, as outlined during my hearing, has been to meet, listen and learn from a wide range of stakeholders about what is working well and where there are areas for improvement in the public appointments process. These have included ministers, permanent secretaries, special advisers and public appointments teams across government. I have also spoken with a selection of Senior Independent Panel Members, executive headhunters, executive coach partnerships, and with voluntary and third-sector organisations promoting diversity in non-executive director roles along with other ethics regulators. These meetings have provided me with a clear picture of the state of public appointments and I am grateful to everyone who has taken the time to meet with me.

Key findings

There are a number of reasons to feel positive about the current public appointments process. The public appointments teams are committed and dedicated and departments take their responsibilities seriously. As a result, there are generally high levels of compliance with the Governance Code on Public Appointments across government. The recent changes to the Code are also welcome and, when implemented, will remove many of the blockers to the smooth running of the public appointments process. Overall, I am satisfied that appointment processes are fair, open and launched with the intention of appointing the best candidates. This is a result of the work of my predecessors, government departments and current and past governments.

There are, however, significant opportunities to make broader improvements to the way that public appointments processes are run.

The candidate experience remains inconsistent and poor on occasion. Candidate care should be at the heart of campaigns but the process can often feel bureaucratic and transactional. My assessment is that this lack of investment in candidate care can dissuade strong candidates from pursuing public appointments. This experience needs to change if we are to ensure we have a best in class, trusted and transparent public appointments process that delivers the best candidates to run some of the most important bodies in the UK.

The length of time that it takes to fill roles has been noted by my predecessors, and was also highlighted in the annual letter written by the Chair of the Ethics and Integrity Commission to the Prime Minister.

I agree that this is an important issue. The proportion of campaigns completed within the (then) three-month aim in the Code has declined significantly from its peak of 47% in 2019.[1] In 2024-25 only 12% of UK Government campaigns were completed within the Code's three-month aim.[2] Departments should be using the new flexibilities in the updated Governance Code, introduced last year, to increase campaign speeds and provide a much better service to candidates.

While important, however, there are other elements to the existing process which can be equally damaging to the candidate experience. There may be very good and understandable reasons why it is not always possible to complete a campaign within the expected timeframe. But I have heard from former candidates, headhunters and executive coach firms that often no update is provided if there is a delay with a campaign, for example, leaving candidates with no sense of if, or when, a campaign will progress. Alongside this, there is often no named contact for applicants to speak with during the campaign. And there is often inconsistent feedback for unsuccessful candidates.

I also think there is a broader awareness issue. I know from talking to many people without a public sector background that the system is poorly understood and can seem opaque. More needs to be done to raise the profile of public appointments, to encourage a broad range of people to apply. I would be keen to see chairs and board members promoting their roles and the unique, fascinating experience of public service. Case studies like these could help demystify the appointments process. I plan on using my office's new LinkedIn page to share these case studies.

What should a good Commissioner be doing?

My intention is to be an accessible and pragmatic Commissioner. This means being open to innovation in the appointments process, with a focus on enabling departments to deliver campaigns that lead to the best person being appointed, not just a set process being followed. I have introduced some immediate changes to my office's work to become more

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[1] See here: Commissioner for Public Appointments (2019), *Thematic review: concluding competitions within three months of the closing date*, July 2019, <https://publicappointmentscommissioner.independent.gov.uk>.
[2] As Commissioner for Welsh Government and UK Government appointments, I should note that this rises to 17% when Welsh Government campaigns are included.

open to departmental queries and suggestions. This includes quarterly surgeries with departments, enabling them to bring key operational and policy challenges to me. This improves my knowledge of the system and will help inform my ongoing engagement with the government about the public appointments system.

At the same time, I am a regulator. I interpret and apply a Code, which sets clear standards and guidelines. I will always take non-compliance seriously and prosecute it diligently. In discharging this duty, I intend to be open and transparent. My approach will be one of 'no surprises' – departments and the Welsh Government should expect to know my red-lines in advance and understand the issues that I am likely to interpret as being non-compliant with the Code. To that end, I have introduced a weekly dashboard tracking all ongoing significant appointment campaigns and my office will use that data to regularly check-in on the progress of campaigns. This will allow me to identify blockers to delivery or potential compliance issues in real time. I can then help with setting standards and unblocking campaigns.

I am now also meeting with Senior Independent Panel Members for significant appointments both before and after campaigns, which helps me understand whether campaigns are running as smoothly as possible and aligned to the Governance Code.

Finally, a good Commissioner must be an active advocate for public appointments. This means both promoting the opportunities of public service and also the importance of diversity across these roles. Over the coming months, I will be attending events in order to promote public appointments to a diverse audience. This will start with a visit to Wales in early November.

As I said during my pre-appointment hearing, I am keen to have a strong relationship with the Committee. I would be happy to discuss any of these matters with you when convenient. In the meantime, I will keep you updated on the progress of my work.

Yours sincerely,



Fiona Cannon OBE
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