

Public Appointments: Guidance on applying

Many people may apply for a public appointment. Not everyone will be successful. Whether you are successful at the application stage will depend on the strength of your application and the strength of applications from others.

This guide is to help you make a stronger application. It will give an overview of applying and assessment as well as a brief description of what happens at the next stage of assessment if your application is successful at the first stage. It is *general* information and it should be read in conjunction with what is in the Applicant Information Pack for the public appointment that you are interested in.

This guide assumes you are interested in a specific regulated public appointment that you have seen advertised on [Appointed for Scotland](#). Regulated public appointments are those where the appointments are made by Scottish Ministers, the process to appoint is administered by the Scottish Government and that process is independently regulated by the [Ethical Standards Commissioner](#).

If you are interested in a public appointment go through the following 6 steps.

Step 1: study the Applicant Information Pack carefully:

- the role and the person specification
- the criteria for selection
- what evidence of meeting the criteria might look like (usually headed “indicators”, “descriptors” or “what does this mean?”)
- how each of the criteria for selection will be tested
- at what stage in the process each of the criteria will be tested.

Step 2: check that the time commitment, remuneration, and location and possible times of any board meetings are appropriate for you.

Step 3: check the disqualifications section (if any) in the Applicant Information Pack.

Step 4: read the section on the Fit and Proper Person Test in the Applicant Information Pack.

Step 5: research the public body. Look at the public body website, what it currently does, what its aims are. Think about the links you can see between any strategic plans on the website and the person specification in the Applicant Information Pack.

Step 6: Apply!

The application process: assessment

There are usually two stages of assessment in the application process. All applications completed and submitted in time are assessed in the first stage. The applications that are successful at the first stage will then go through to the second stage of assessment.

Assessment stage 1: An initial application

Most public appointments rounds ask people to make an initial written application. This might be an application form, or a letter of interest, or a career history, or something else. The way to apply will be described in the Applicant Information Pack.

As part of submitting your application, you will be asked in a form to provide your personal details and other information relevant to the public appointments process including diversity monitoring information.

Selection panels 'shortlist' on the basis of the initial application, scoring the application against the [criteria](#) in the Applicant Information Pack for this assessment stage. Applications that are assessed as providing the strongest evidence and which most closely meet the requirements of the role(s) are put through to the second stage of assessment. Selection panel decisions are based purely on the quality of the evidence provided by applicants. In some cases, applications are anonymised and panels don't see details such as names and addresses until after the panel have decided which applications should go through to the second stage of assessment. Panels do not see individual applicants' diversity monitoring information.

Assessment stage 2: usually an interview + sometimes another activity

The second stage of assessment will in most cases be an interview. Interviews are often combined with other assessment activities that simulate what a board member will be expected to do when in post. For example, applicants might be asked before the interview to read and assess a board paper. The applicant will then be questioned about their views on the content of the paper by the selection panel. The form of assessments will be described in the Applicant Information Pack.

The application

Follow the instructions in the Applicant Information Pack and in the application about the type of evidence that you should be providing and how to provide it.

Generally speaking:

- to demonstrate abilities, working knowledge or a track record you will usually be asked for a written example – it helps if this covers a specific issue
- to demonstrate simple experience you will usually be asked to give information like a career history
- to demonstrate knowledge you will usually be asked to answer relevant questions and/or to confirm that you have a relevant qualification in the subject matter.

If you are asked to give examples against criteria, then each criterion is usually testing one (or more) of skills, knowledge, or experience. Look at the [guide to person specifications](#) to see core skills often sought in board members.

- Skills - usually expressed in a criterion as “the ability to...”. So the criterion might look like “the ability to work effectively as a member of a team” or “the ability to analyse complex issues and give your views on them”.
- Knowledge - usually of a particular subject matter such as “Knowledge of the links between the various organisations that provide health and social care in Scotland”. Sometimes “working knowledge” is sought which means the board needs people who have applied their knowledge in practical circumstances.
- Experience - this can cover a wide range of criteria expressed in different ways. Here are some examples: “First-hand experience of the barriers faced by people with mobility problems when seeking to use public transport services”; “At least two years’ experience as a practising solicitor in Scotland”.

What to do

For written examples to provide evidence against criteria: provide specific examples of issues that you have faced and what you did to resolve them. Explain clearly what the issue was, what you did and how you did it, the reasons for your actions, what happened, what you took into account, and the outcome. Try to demonstrate that what you did made a positive difference. If it didn’t, demonstrate what you learned and what you would do differently in a similar situation in the future. Try to draw out how this example meets the indicators or descriptors.

Use examples which best demonstrate your skills, working knowledge or track record in that area.

Try to use a different example for each criterion so that you demonstrate a breadth of experience.

You can use examples that aren’t from the workplace – examples can be drawn from volunteering or your personal life as long as they provide good evidence you’ve met the criteria.

Clearly address the indicators or descriptors in the person specification.

Explain acronyms the first time you use them so that the selection panel knows what they mean and how they are relevant to the specific criterion.

Assume that some or all of the selection panel may not know your employer, job or sector and so write for them.

Be clear and succinct and keep within the word limit.

Things to avoid

Don't assume that the evidence you provide will be obvious to the selection panel. This is especially an issue when it comes to job titles or job roles.

For example, if the criterion is something like “At least two years of experience as a practising solicitor in Scotland” then “I have been practising law with ABC family lawyers in Dundee for the past ten years” is appropriate evidence. But if the criterion is something like “A successful track record such as in settling claims” then “I have been practising law with ABC family lawyers in Dundee for the past ten years” is unlikely to be appropriate evidence for the selection panel. That's because the selection panel would have to make assumptions about what you had done in your role at ABC family lawyers and how you did it. Think through whether the criterion is trying to prompt you to give examples of what you've done, rather than who you've been or what positions you have held.

Avoid assertion. Simply stating that you meet a specific criterion isn't very good evidence. For example, with a criterion like “An ability to work effectively as a member of a team”, an example of assertion would be “I always work well in teams”. It would be better to give an example that demonstrates your team working ability – a project you did with other people, team skills you used, your contribution to the team, what the end result was.

For the criterion “A successful track record such as in settling claims” then asserting that “As a lawyer for ten years, I have successfully settled many claims” or stating “Senior partner in ABC firm” is unlikely to be sufficient evidence. It would be better to give a specific example which best demonstrated to the selection panel what the issue was, what it is you did, the reasons for your actions, the skills you used and what specifically about your approach affected the outcome.

With a criterion like “Knowledge of the links between the various organisations that provide health and social care in Scotland” then an example of assertion would be “I know a lot about the links between organisations that provide health and social care.” A better response could be to describe the types of different organisations involved in health and social care provision and the relationships that exist between them - that would demonstrate to an extent that you have the knowledge that is sought. Another response could be to give a specific example of something you did that involved you using your knowledge of the links across health and social care provision in Scotland.

Where possible, use “I” not “We”. The selection panel is looking for evidence that relates specifically to you as the applicant as opposed to the group or organisation that you belonged to and/or worked for. The following are examples where it is not clear that an applicant personally meets the criteria: “I am a policy officer with XYZ charity. We do lots of work with organisations involved in health and social care provision”. “We reviewed a very complex IT contract and concluded that it would not be appropriate for our organisation”. In these examples, the panel will be unable to tell precisely what you know or are capable of.

Avoid jargon and technical terms.

Avoid a generalised description of what you would usually do.

How applications are assessed

In appointment rounds where a written application form is required and applicants have been provided with criteria and descriptors of those criteria, selection panels are provided with the following guidance on scoring applications:

Very Poor or No Evidence

Where an applicant does not mention a competency/skill criteria at all or deals with it only in passing. An example of this is providing a one sentence statement e.g. "I possess excellent communication skills", with no elaboration.

Poor or Little Evidence

Insufficient evidence or information is provided. Applicants may deal with the skill but provide either no firm evidence or examples, or they provide no depth to show how they applied it in practice e.g. "I have to organise meetings on a regular basis, and I would obviously not be able to do this without exceptional organisational and planning skills".

Acceptable Evidence

Sufficient information is provided to give the panel a good grasp of the applicant's skills. The applicant should explain what actions they took, and how they applied the competency/skill, backed up by relevant examples(s) or evidence, ideally with an indicator of success.

Good Evidence

Building on the above but with more breadth and depth to the information and evidence provided. The panel should be left in no doubt that the applicant possesses and uses the competency/skill. There should be a quality to the evidence that shows variety in the application of the competency/skill and some sophistication in their approach.

Exceptional Evidence

As above but covering all aspects of the competency/skill, along with more detailed example(s) that are very relevant and demonstrate real depth, breadth and sophistication in their approach.

Once your application has been assessed by the selection panel ('the shortlist') and the panel has agreed which applications should go through to the second stage of assessment, you will be contacted about the outcome of your application.

The second stage of assessment

If your application is successful at the shortlist stage then you will be invited to the next stage of assessment. This is usually an interview and sometimes another activity. The Applicant Information Pack will tell you which criteria will be tested at the second stage of assessment.

In some appointment rounds, candidates invited to the second stage of assessment will be subject to a social media check, this will be stated in the Applicant Information Pack.

Reasonable adjustments

If your application is successful at shortlist and you are invited to the next stage of assessment, please let us know if you require a reasonable adjustment for the interview or other assessments. It helps us if you let us know when we contact you to agree an interview date, or soon after, so that we can put arrangements in place.

We can make a range of adjustments, for example an adjustment of the time in the interview for any practical exercises, using coloured paper, or an introduction to the building where an interview is being held (if it is not being done virtually) so that you are familiar with the layout. This isn't an exhaustive list and we won't use the information you have provided in a diversity monitoring form to make assumptions about a reasonable adjustment. So please get in touch and we can discuss what's right for you.

An interview

For an interview, prepare yourself by thinking through in advance your evidence for each criterion to be tested at this stage. It will be explained in the applicant information which criteria will be tested at the interview and one or more criteria might be tested at both the first assessment stage and this second assessment stage. Interview questions will be focussed around the criteria and the person specification rather than a general discussion.

Think about how you will explain your evidence to the selection panel. The panel may ask you questions that are phrased so that you will respond with specific examples. For example, with a question like "Tell us about a time when you demonstrated an ability to work in a strategic context", it will help the panel if you describe a specific issue, what you did to address the issue, how you did it and the skills you used, the reasons for your actions, and what the outcome was.

An interview will usually include "[Fit and Proper Person](#)" questions. This will have been explained in the Applicant Information Pack. These check whether you are a suitable applicant against the [nine principles of public life in Scotland](#). The questions also explore things like your availability to undertake the role, whether there is something in the founding legislation for the public body or its constitution that might bar you from the role, whether your conduct to date has been compatible with the role, and whether there are any likely potential conflicts of interest.

Don't assume that a potential conflict of interest automatically rules you out – the selection panel would usually try to explore with you whether the conflict of interest is manageable, how it could be managed, and what thought you had given to that.

Another assessment activity

As well as an interview, there might be another activity that will be assessed. The activity might take place at the beginning of the interview or separately. The activity might be something like providing you with an example of a board paper and asking you to discuss it, or a short verbal response to a question on a specific topic which may require some research, or a mock media interview on a dilemma.

If there is another activity it will be briefly described in the Applicant Information Pack and if you are invited to the second stage of assessment you would be provided with any additional information.

Selection for appointment

After the interviews and any other assessment activity, the selection panel will discuss and assess the applicants' performance and agree which applicants best demonstrated merit against the criteria. They will agree which applicants they will recommend to the appointing Minister. They might recommend more than one person per role.

The final decision of whom to appoint remains with the Minister, including whether to appoint at all. The appointing Minister may wish to meet (virtually at the moment) those that have been recommended before making the decision.

Once the appointing Minister has made a decision, applicants who were invited to the second stage of assessment will be contacted with the outcome of their application.

The successful applicants would be offered an appointment.