



**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

# **Recruitment Guidance: Members Support Staff**

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## Introduction

1. The Independent Financial Review Panel's Assembly Members [Salaries and Expenses] Determination [Northern Ireland] 2016 ('the 2016 Determination') sets out the rules under which you can recover the expenses associated with the recruitment and employment of Support Staff.
2. We have developed this Recruitment Guidance to help you recruit Support Staff on the basis of fair and open competition and to make appointments on the basis of merit.
3. Equality of opportunity is integral to the recruitment process and, as an employer you have responsibility to ensure that no unlawful discrimination occurs against persons who have legally protected social identities. Recruitment should be solely on the basis of merit, and should provide equality of opportunity to all applicants, irrespective of gender, marital or family status, religious belief, political opinion, disability, race, sexual orientation or age.
4. The general rule of good practice is that your recruitment procedures and practices must be applied fairly and consistently to all job applicants. You may also be required to make *reasonable adjustments* to some or all of those procedures and practices if that is needed to remove any disadvantages which they cause for any disabled job applicants e.g. application form in a different format.
5. This is a general guidance document and is only intended to provide information on the key steps in a recruitment process. However, if you require any specific information and advice in relation to the recruitment or employment of a member of your Support Staff, you should consult a solicitor or the Labour Relations Agency (LRA).

6. The Guidance is structured around the key stages of a recruitment process which are:-

- Selection Panel Membership;
- Planning Meeting to agree the documentation for the recruitment process and to take key decisions on how the process will run;
- Shortlisting of Applications;
- Interview Procedures; and
- Post Interview Actions.

7. We also provide details of 'Useful Contacts' at the end of this guidance.

## ***Selection Panel Membership***

8. One of the first decisions to take at the start of a recruitment process is to decide who will sit on the selection panel. The panel should be made up of at least two people (one of which will generally be you as the employer) and will as far as possible have gender balance and community background balance. The panel should be consistent throughout each stage of the recruitment process so getting early commitment of a panel member's availability, is essential.
9. Panel members should have received relevant training to ensure they are competent in conducting recruitment and selection. The LRA hold good practice seminars on recruitment and selection dealing with issues such as compliance with legislation and good practice processes and these sessions can be arranged in accordance with LRA Operational Guidelines. In addition, advisory guidance on recruitment and selection is available from the LRA free of charge and upon request.
10. The 2016 Determination allows you to recover expenses for the employment of a person who is defined as a 'connected person'<sup>1</sup>. If you consider there is a possibility that a connected person may apply for your post, and you feel that this may impact on your ability to be perceived as an objective and impartial panel member, then you should not sit on the selection panel and instead, identify an alternative panel member.

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<sup>1</sup> The 2016 Determination defines a 'connected person' as a person connected with a member if that person is –  
(a) a family member of the member,  
(b) a political party of which the member is a member, or  
(c) a person with whom the member is connected within the meaning of section 252(2)(b)-(e) of the Companies Act 2006.

## ***Planning Meeting***

11. The selection panel should hold a Planning Meeting to agree the documentation for the recruitment process and to take key decisions on how the process will run.
12. The following documents/procedure decisions should be agreed by the selection panel at the Planning Meeting:-
  - Job Description and Person Specification including essential and desirable criteria;
  - Advertisement and how the post will be advertised;
  - Application form; and
  - Interview procedures and documentation.

### *Job Description and Person Specification including essential and desirable criteria*

13. Under the 2016 Determination, you are entitled to recover costs incurred in the employment of Support Staff into three defined grades – Grade 1; Grade 2 and Grade 3.
14. In December 2014, the Independent Financial Review Panel ('the Panel') issued a consultation document on the expenses available to MLAs to employ staff. Within that document, the Panel consulted on a sample of job descriptions for typical Support Staff roles. These sample job descriptions are shown at **Appendix A**.
15. In developing your job description, you should ensure it accurately reflects the main purpose of the job and the job title should be appropriate. The job description should also document who the job holder reports to and which posts, if any, report to the job-holder.
16. You will also need to develop a person specification for the job. A person specification identifies the qualifications, experience and personal qualities required for the job. It is important that there is a direct linkage between the

person specification and the job description. In this way the person's ability to do the job is considered, not unrelated personal characteristics.

17. The person specification should include essential criteria and if required, desirable criteria. Essential criteria reflect the experience and knowledge that an applicant must possess in order to be able to undertake the role. In setting essential criteria, the selection panel must also consider if a minimum period of experience is necessary. Desirable criteria is the experience and knowledge that would be an advantage for the applicant to possess. Desirable criteria can be used by the selection panel to shortlist and hence reduce the field of applicants if deemed necessary. The desirable criteria should be applied in the order shown in the person specification.
18. In developing and agreeing the person specification, the selection panel must be careful not to specify unnecessary requirements that may also be discriminatory. For example:
  - a. do not say a driving licence is required if any travelling can easily be done using public transport;
  - b. do not say a person must have GCSEs or A-levels only, if other equivalent qualifications, such as those gained overseas, are satisfactory too; or
  - c. do not say a person must have recent work experience, if work experience gained at any other time would be just as satisfactory.

*Advertisement and how the post will be advertised*

19. Any recruitment activity should be aimed at attracting as broad a pool of applicants as possible. The funding you have available for advertising will be a primary consideration in deciding where to advertise and the 2016 Determination sets out the financial limit to which you can reclaim expenses relating to the running of a recruitment competition.
20. Where practical, you should advertise widely so that as many eligible and suitably qualified persons as possible have an opportunity to apply. Use a

variety of different avenues to publish your advertisements. For example, if you advertise job vacancies on your party website you should also consider advertising in newspapers, local schools, colleges or universities, or online recruitment websites. You may also wish to use the local Job & Benefits Office/Job Centre(s) to advertise your post. Normally a post is advertised for a minimum of two weeks.

21. The Assembly Commission will, in the future, give consideration to Members using the Northern Ireland Assembly's website to advertise Support Staff posts.
22. The wording of the advertisement is very important in ensuring that you not only attract applicants who meet your criteria but also to ensure that you do not directly or indirectly discriminate against any individual or group. Using language such as "mature", "youthful" or "energetic" could indicate that you are looking for applicants of a particular age and could be viewed as discrimination on the grounds of age. You may wish to also insert an equal opportunities statement into your advertisement to reflect that you welcome applications from all suitably qualified persons. A useful publication entitled 'Recruitment Advertising: A Good Practice Guide for Employers for Promoting Equality of Opportunity' is published by the Equality Commission NI (ECNI). Contact details for the ECNI are available at the end of this document.
23. A sample advertisement is attached at **Appendix B**.

#### Application form

24. An application form will help you to obtain consistent and necessary information from applicants on the knowledge, experience and skills needed for the job and will assist you when shortlisting applications for your post.
25. The Equality Commission's Guidance on Positive Action for People who are Disabled, recommends the use of a Guaranteed Interview Scheme (GIS). The GIS is developed for applicants with disabilities or those with a long term impairment or health condition, that is expected to last for at least 12 months

and which means that they cannot meet all of the shortlisting criteria. In these instances, provided that they have demonstrated in their application form that they meet the essential criteria for the post, the applicant will be offered a guaranteed interview.

26. A template application form is available at **Appendix C**.

*Interview procedures and documentation*

27. At the Planning meeting, the Selection Panel should agree all of the procedures and documentation (including interview questions) that will be used during the interview process. Further details on interview procedures is shown later in this Recruitment Guidance.

## ***Shortlisting of Applications***

28. Shortlisting is an initial assessment of the applicants based solely on the information contained in their application forms. The purpose is to decide which applicants meet the essential and (if necessary) desirable job criteria so that they may be given more in-depth consideration at the next stage of the process.
29. The criteria to be applied are those that are set out in the person specification for the job in question.
30. The essential criteria must always be applied. The Selection Panel will decide whether any of the desirable criteria will also be applied.
31. Sometimes qualifications will be listed in the person specification and used in the shortlisting process. In cases of doubt and before making a final shortlisting decision, the Selection Panel should make enquiries from an appropriate authority to check the values and equivalences of academic and other qualifications, especially those that were gained overseas.
32. The shortlisting decisions must be fair and consistent and must be recorded. A template Shortlisting Assessment Form is shown at **Appendix D**.
33. All notes relating to a recruitment competition should be retained, for audit purposes, for the duration of a mandate. The Information Commissioner's Office has issued guidance to assist small employers in complying with the Data Protection Act 1998 when recruiting and employing workers. This guidance is shown at **Appendix E**.
34. Template letters following the shortlisting process are shown at **Appendix F**.

## ***Interview Procedures***

35. The letter which is sent to applicants inviting them to the interview should specify the date, time and location of the interview, including if appropriate, a map. It should indicate the status of the interview e.g. first or second interview and whether any other form of additional assessment will be used e.g. test. The letter should also provide contact details for applicants requiring special assistance or reasonable adjustments related to a disability, or in relation to language barriers. Applicants should also be advised of any documents they need to bring with them, e.g., evidence of entitlement to work in the United Kingdom, proof of qualifications etc.
  
36. An interview is the most commonly used method to assess which applicant is the best person for the job. Every applicant should be offered the same opportunity to demonstrate their suitability for the job. Use of a structured interview with the same questions for each applicant will provide you with an effective way of obtaining information against the skills and knowledge that you identified in the job description. The purpose of the interview is to determine which applicant best fulfil these requirements. It also means there is a consistent form to the interview, which is important to ensure each applicant is treated fairly.
  
37. The selection panel should develop and agree indicators for each of the interview questions so that the applicant's answers can be assessed and scored in an independent way that relates to the job requirements. A scoring scale should also be agreed. A sample scoring scale is shown at **Appendix G**.
  
38. The following are some pointers in helping you carry out an effective interview:-
  - Ensure that waiting areas are comfortable and give applicants an indication of how long they may have to wait. Do not keep applicants waiting for a long time as this presents a negative image.
  - Ensure that there are no interruptions, such as a telephone, as they can disrupt the interview and make the applicant nervous.

- Welcome applicants to the interview and introduce the panel members. Give an outline of the format that the interview will take and let them know that you will be taking notes.
  - Ask the applicant if they have any questions before you start the interview.
  - Ask questions in pre-arranged order, taking care to ask only one question at a time. Ensure all applicants are asked all questions and try to ensure you adhere to the pre-set time limits.
  - Commence with structured questions that form the main body of the interview and which cover all relevant aspects of the job.
  - Ask any follow-up questions. These should be open-ended questions that can't be answered with just 'yes' or 'no'.
  - Ensure that applicants are not asked questions of a personal nature which could lead to perceptions of discrimination, e.g., asking an older worker how they feel about managing younger workers, or asking a woman about her childcare arrangements etc.
  - Avoid throwaway comments or annotations of a stereotypical nature, e.g., "We don't get many females applying here".
  - Allow applicants an opportunity to ask any questions they may have.
  - Close the interview by thanking the applicant for attending and give an indication of the next step in the process.
  - Record notes on the applicants' responses. Your notes should be a concise and objective record of what is said and done; you don't evaluate (by writing comments such as 'has good judgement') at this stage – that is done only after the applicant has left the room. Your notes will act as an audit trail should any subsequent queries or complaints be raised. You should be mindful that applicants will have access to these notes under the Data Protection Act (DPA) 1998, should they wish to see them.
39. Following each interview, the selection panel should, using their notes, discuss the applicant's answers at interview against the pre-agreed indicators. The selection panel should then reach consensus on an agreed score for each interview question and an agreed overall mark.

40. The chair of the selection panel should note down the justification for each of the individual interview scores and the overall score. They should also note down whether the applicant is deemed appointable i.e. have they met the minimum standard required. A template 'Interview Assessment Form' is shown at **Appendix H**.
41. A template Interview Mark Frame is attached at **Appendix I**. This document records the overall scores for each applicant as well as the names of those applicants who failed to attend the interview.
42. All interview documentation should be stored securely and confidentially, and retained/destroyed in line with DPA requirements.

## ***Post Interview Actions***

43. In general employers are not under any legal obligation to provide a reference for an existing or former employee, with the exception of those working in financial services. Consider whether you wish to take up references prior to making the successful applicant an offer of employment. References are used to find out if the successful applicant is suitable for the job and is a reliable employee.
44. It is recommended that, when references are sought, structured guidance of the job for which the applicant is applying, including the job description, should be provided to referees. You should be aware that many employers will not respond to reference requests unless to confirm facts about their employee e.g. length of service; salary etc
45. You should also be aware that information provided in a written reference is subject to DPA requirements and may be accessed by an individual through a subject access request. A sample 'reference request letter' is shown at **Appendix J**.
46. Ensure that you have all details of the job offer prior to approaching the successful applicant. An employment offer is done in writing and it sets out the terms and conditions of the appointment. A template Statement of Particulars of Employment is available for you to use.
47. While an employer is not obliged to provide feedback for applicants who are unsuccessful it is considered good practice to do so. It is beneficial for applicants to have feedback as it can enable them to improve their interview performance for future job opportunities and provide further information as to why they were unsuccessful. It is the responsibility of one of the panel members to give feedback to those who request it. The general aim of feedback is to provide constructive advice to demonstrate why the applicant did not get the job.
48. The following are key points to consider when giving feedback:

**Dos**

- Ensure that the feedback is based on an objective judgment, using the Interview Assessment Form as a basis for the discussion.
- Feedback should incorporate positive feedback from the selection process in addition to feedback on areas where the applicant did not demonstrate that he/she met the criteria for the post.
- Feedback should be constructive e.g. suggesting ways in which the applicant may obtain the skills and experience that would better fit them for the job.
- Provide feedback in writing. A record should be kept of any feedback given to applicants.

**Don'ts**

- Reference to any knowledge of the applicant that did not form part of the application or selection process must not be made.
- Feedback given must be based on the notes taken at sift or during the interview; memory alone should not be relied on.
- Feedback must not be given to anyone except the applicant.
- Discussions about other applicants should not be entered into, although it is sometimes appropriate to refer anonymously to the successful applicant in order to demonstrate how the successful applicant had more appropriate experience, skills or potential.

## ***Useful contacts***

**Labour Relations Agency** Belfast Office 2-16 Gordon Street Belfast, Bt1 2LG 028 9032 1442 [www.lra.org.uk](http://www.lra.org.uk) Regional Office 1-3 Guildhall Street, Londonderry BT48 6BB 028 7126 9639 [www.lra.org.uk](http://www.lra.org.uk)

**Border and Immigration division of the Home Office**, Employers Helpline 0845 010 6677 [www.biahomeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.biahomeoffice.gov.uk)

**Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI)** Equality House 7 - 9 Shaftesbury Square Belfast BT2 7DP 028 9089 0890 [www.equalityni.org](http://www.equalityni.org)

**Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO)** Amelia House 4 Amelia Street Belfast BT2 7GS 028 9032 0157 [www.niacro.co.uk](http://www.niacro.co.uk)

**Information Commissioner**– Northern Ireland (for guidance on Data Protection Issues) 51 Adelaide Street Belfast BT2 8FE Telephone: 028 9026 9380 Fax: 028 9026 9388 Email: [ni@ico.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:ni@ico.gsi.gov.uk) Helpline Number: 01625 54 57 45 [www.ico.gov.uk](http://www.ico.gov.uk)