



Work and Pensions Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

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From the Chair

Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP
Secretary of State
Department for Work and Pensions

18 May 2020

Dear Thérèse,

I am writing, on behalf of the Committee, to express our disappointment at DWP's handling of the recruitment of the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) Chair and its failure to engage with the Committee before launching the campaign. It is particularly regrettable that Committee only became aware of this campaign after it was launched, and was not told about it by the Department.

As you will know, the Cabinet Office's guidance for civil servants on posts subject to pre-appointment scrutiny makes clear that:

- The Department should engage with the relevant select committee early in the recruitment process;
- The Department should consult the Chair of the select committee about the proposed selection process before a recruitment exercise begins, and share: job description and person specification, a proposed outline of the timetable for the campaign and any relevant information about the proposed advertising strategy;
- The Committee should be given at least a week to allow it to meet, consider that information and make any representations;
- The Committee should be engaged in discussions about the timetable for the process before it starts.

The Department failed to comply with any of the above guidance before launching the recruitment campaign. Given that the vacancy arose some 9 months ago, it is not clear why no attempt was made to engage with the Committee or its predecessor.

I am sure that you appreciate the essential role that parliamentary scrutiny plays in the public appointments process. Without full cooperation and openness from the Government, select committees cannot carry out this function.

It would be helpful to know:

- Why the Cabinet Office guidance was not followed in this case, and what steps you are taking to ensure that this is not repeated;
- How the Department plans to engage with the Committee throughout the remaining stages of the recruitment process.

While I appreciate that Baroness Stedman-Scott has now written to the Committee (on 7 May) with apologies for the failure to inform the Committee about the launch of the recruitment process, it is disappointing that we only received this letter after Committee staff raised their concerns with DWP officials, rather than it being instigated by your Department. We have received no apology for the Department's wider failure to follow the Cabinet Office guidance on engagement with committees.

On the recruitment process itself, I would be grateful if you could explain some differences between the 2018 recruitment of the previous Chair and the process to be followed this year. The independence of the Chair of the SSAC, and their ability to give independent advice to the Government even when it may be unwelcome, is paramount. In particular:

- We have noticed that both civil servants on the recruitment panel are from DWP, while one was from HMRC in 2018. Is there a reason why both are from DWP this time?
- The 2020 person specification calls for 'strong, measured and balanced leadership qualities', compared to the 2018 version, which simply asked for 'strong leadership qualities'. Could you explain the reasoning behind the addition of 'measured and balanced'?
- Similarly, the current person specification calls for the 'ability to take an **impartial** view', while the 2018 specification called for the 'ability to take an **independent** view'. Why was this change made? As far as the recruitment is concerned, how does an impartial view differ from an independent one?

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Stephen Timms'.

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee