



Department
for Work &
Pensions

THE RT HON THERESE COFFEY MP
Secretary of State for Work & Pensions

Caxton House
Tothill Street
London, SW1H 9AJ

387 June 2020

Dear Stephen,

Thank you for your letter dated 18th May 2020 regarding the Department's engagement with the Committee on the recruitment of the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) Chair. I am grateful for you bringing this to my attention.

Parliamentary scrutiny plays an important role in the public appointments process and I understand your concerns. I am embarrassed that in this instance Cabinet Office Guidance was not followed, in terms of the need to engage with the Work and Pensions Select Committee ('the Committee'), from the outset. I have asked for this to be looked into as I do not want this failure in process to happen again.

We now have a choice whether to continue with the current recruitment campaign or to stop and start again. Recognising how far we are along the journey, it is my preference to continue and I hope that the further information below will give sufficient confidence to the Committee for it to do so, according to the expected procedure.

The make-up of the recruitment panel was considered carefully. Pete Searle as Director for ALB Partnerships, has had direct input into the work of SSAC and has been the chair of previous Advisory Assessment Panels for SSAC recruitment exercises, including the former Chair. His previous involvement will bring continuity. The additional DWP panel member, Tammy Fevrier, is on the DWP BAME fast track programme and is the SSAC Business Partner; her knowledge and workings of SSAC will benefit the panel. The former OCPA-appointed Public Appointments Assessor Rosie Varley is well equipped to both challenge and support the panel as the independent member.

When preparing the person specification, we built on lessons learned from the previous Chair appointment and took account of the strategic direction of SSAC over the next five years, the experience of SSAC members and the requirement to strengthen relationships with both Ministers and a diverse group of stakeholders.

I would be grateful if the Committee Clerk can agree next steps through my Private Office.

Yours sincerely,

Therese



Work and Pensions Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

Email workpencom@parliament.uk

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,



Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee



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Stephen Timms MP
Chair
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7th May 2020

Dear Stephen,

Chair - Social Security Advisory Committee

Following the resignation of Prof Sir Ian Diamond, former Chair of the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC), on 6 August 2019, Dr Liz Sayce OBE (SSAC Member) was appointed as the interim Chair. This note is to inform you of the selection process to recruit a permanent Chair for SSAC.

SSAC is an independent statutory body, funded by the DWP. It is the UK Government's advisory body on social security matters.

The recruitment exercise was launched on 5 May 2020 and is being run in line with the Governance Code relating to public appointments. I will be closely engaged throughout the process. Please accept my sincere apologies for not informing the committee prior to the launch of the exercise. Due to these unprecedented times our department has been very stretched, but I will ensure that this does not happen again.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Public Appointments Team will manage the recruitment process throughout. In order to find good candidates and encourage them to apply, DWP is engaging with the Cabinet Office Public Appointments Team, the No10 Public Appointments Team, Special Advisors and SSAC to reach out to potential appointees.

The Advisory Assessment Panel (interview panel) will consist of Pete Searle, Director for Private Pensions and ALB Partnership, as Chair; Dr Jim

McCormick, SSAC Member, will be the representative from the Body; Tammy Fevrier, DWP ALB Partner, will act as a member and Rosie Varley, a former OCPA appointed Public Appointments Assessor, is the Senior Independent Member. All panel members will be involved in the long and shortlisting process and my views will be sought on the suitability of the field at the end of the search, as well as at the sift stages, in line with Governance Code procedures. I expect to meet all appointable candidates before discussing with Secretary of State and agreeing a name to put forward to your Committee. I have included the role description and person specification at **Annex 1**.

DWP officials will liaise with your Clerk to discuss the timings of any hearing.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Debbie Stedman-Scott". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line under the name "Stedman-Scott".

BARONESS STEDMAN-SCOTT
MINISTER FOR WORK AND PENSIONS (LORDS)

The Role of the Chair

In setting the strategic direction for the Committee, the SSAC Chair will be required to demonstrate strong leadership in harnessing the skills, expertise and experience of a diverse Committee membership ensuring that it operates effectively as a team. The successful candidate will have the ability to build constructive relationships at senior levels (both in Government and with external stakeholders) and demonstrate good judgement.

The Chair will ensure the Committee provides an independent view (independent of both Government and other interested parties) which is evidence based and which reflects a wide range of perspectives.

Scrutinising, and where the Committee so decides, reporting on draft regulations entails mastering complex legal and technical detail, as well as understanding the operational context in which legislation will be brought into effect. The Chair will be able to draw on the considerable knowledge and expertise of the Committee membership during the scrutiny process, however they will need to have the capability to pick up on detailed proposals quickly in order that he/she can communicate credibly with Ministers, stakeholders and the media as appropriate.

The Chair also develops and maintains productive and constructive relationships with Ministers, Committee colleagues, senior civil servants,¹ and the Committee's external stakeholders in the course of SSAC's work. The Chair does this through a mixture of formal and informal meetings and visits, attendance at events and conferences and through attending the Committee's own stakeholder events.

The Chair and Members have access to sensitive proposals from time to time. These are shared with the Committee in confidence.

Essential Criteria

- Strong, measured and balanced leadership qualities with the ability to set and shape the strategic direction of the Committee, and to harnesses effectively the expertise and experience of a diverse Committee membership ensuring that it operates effectively as a team;
- Ability to operate constructively and build positive relationships with Committee colleagues and senior stakeholders (for example in this role you will regularly work with Ministers, senior Whitehall officials, Parliamentarians and other senior stakeholders) - communicating effectively/persuasively and demonstrating sound judgement;

¹ From DWP, the Department for Communities (NI), HM Treasury (HMT) and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). SSAC has a Memorandum of Understanding with HMT and HMRC.

- An interest in social security issues and the ability to understand, evaluate and advise objectively on complex issues relating to social security;
- Ability to take an impartial view (independent of both Government and other interested parties) which reflects a wide range of perspectives. To be credible, the Chair will need to be able to demonstrate their independence from the Committee's primary stakeholders;
- An understanding of Government policy and the political and financial context in which social security policy operates; and
- The capacity to devote around five days per month to the Committee.

Desirable Criteria

- An understanding of finance and governance issues including managing public money and financial probity