



Cabinet Office

Audit Report

February 2025

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Executive Summary

The Civil Service Commission audits organisations to drive greater innovation and improvement in departmental practice, while ensuring the important principle of recruitment on merit, after fair and open competition remains the cornerstone of an effective and impartial Civil Service.

The new audit programme better reflects the differences in scale and the challenge of recruitment within the different departments and organisations that the CSC regulates.

For each audit the Commission requests evidence on six campaigns, with each to include records related to:

- o the job advert;
- o the candidate pack;
- o the sift records (with scores);
- o the interview questions;
- o the interview scores (with feedback);
- o the appointment; and
- o the chair / panel report.

and:

- requests evidence on six exceptions;
- issues a questionnaire related to diversity, innovation and SCS recruitment;
- identifies areas of concern; potential breaches to the Recruitment Principles; and clarifying evidence from the organisation required for the interim audit;
- discusses the above with each organisation at an audit meeting;
- moderates the final report with Civil Service Commissioners including, where relevant, the department's Link Commissioner;
- issues the Final Audit Report with the audit rating to the organisation; and
- follows up recommendations with the organisation to ensure the actions have been addressed.

Profile

The Cabinet Office (CO) is a ministerial department. Its role is to support the Prime Minister and ensure the effective running of government. It is also the corporate headquarters for the government, in partnership with HM Treasury, and takes the lead in certain critical policy areas.

- **Headcount:** 6,455 (August 2024)
- **Appointments:** 1,392 (last four quarters)
- **Exceptions:** 57 (last four quarters)
- **SCS1+2 / Commissioner-led competitions:** 44/17 (last four quarters)

The CO audit was in August 2024.

The CO Complexity Score is 5. This reflects a standard score for the largest departments, with a varied or current high profile. CO was content with this score.

CO was engaged throughout the audit process and audit meeting and staff have attended the CSC Recruitment Principles training. The Government Recruitment Service (GRS) added informative evidence on recruitment processes.

Audit Findings

The audit reviewed six campaigns and six exceptions.

Good Practice

One campaign showed detailed guidance given to candidates about what to include in their personal statements and their freedom regarding its structure. This helps ensure that candidates are not being unequally disadvantaged by lack of information.

Accessibility packs provided a good level of information about how experience, behaviours and strengths would be assessed in line with the Success Profiles. Additionally, the job adverts clearly explained how reserve lists would be used.

Areas for Improvement

There was no explanation for candidates about how desirable criteria would be assessed across campaigns. This disadvantages candidates as some will prepare responses and others may not.

Queries Raised

- The Commission noted that an advert listed no essential criteria. The 'Person Specification' title was followed by a job description and the only other reference to criteria was the desirable criteria.

CO confirmed that the desirable criteria was the essential criteria that candidates would be assessed against. CO would investigate the application page (separate from the advert) to see if this occurred elsewhere.

Breaches of the Recruitment Principles

One Technical breach was recorded in the audit. However, CO recorded a further four breaches outside of the audit.

One Technical breach related to poor record keeping on sift sheets which omitted candidates' scores. CO said this is due to having various localised business areas.

Two Serious breaches both related to prior approval not being sought for exception conditions. One related to an appointment that paid over the SCS pay band 2 minimum, and the other related to a secondment that was made within 12 months of an earlier secondment without CSC approval.

One Technical breach related to two behaviours being assessed jointly and another related to assessing an unadvertised behaviour at the interview (noted on interview record).

Exceptions

The audit reviewed the following six exceptions:

- **Exception 1:** HEO temporary appointment (Exception 1) for 1 month.
- **Exception 2:** HEO temporary appointment (Exception 1) for 12 months.
- **Exception 3:** G6 temporary appointment (Exception 1) for 2 months.
- **Exception 4:** AO temporary appointment (Exception 1) for 2 months.
- **Exception 5:** G6 temporary appointment (Exception 1) for 6 months.
- **Exception 6:** G7 temporary appointment (Exception 1) for 10 months.

Exception 1 usage

- **Total (last four quarters):** 21

The Cabinet Office (CO) made a total of 21 Exception 1 appointments. This is reasonable usage given the department's size and complexity. All 6 exceptions audited were Exception 1 appointments. No breaches were found in any of these.

CO has a process to approve people brought in by exception. These are noted on a spreadsheet and monitored on a monthly basis. CO contacts relevant business units when an end date is coming up.

Diversity, Innovation and SCS Recruitment

Diversity

CO tracks diversity data through the end to end recruitment process. Analysis shows positive results for the levels of ethnic diversity at application stage for AO - G6 roles.

CO runs diversity training sessions every two weeks for all staff. Additionally, CO delivers regular Internal Recruitment Network (230 colleagues across CO involved in recruitment) sessions on recruiting inclusively.

CO manages life chances programmes and participates in the Going Forward into Employment Scheme; Care Leavers Internship; Autism Spectrum Employment Scheme; and the Great Place to Work for Veterans Scheme. CO is working with business units to host intern placements from relevant schemes.

Innovation

CO is developing a user testing AI tool to support drafting adverts.

CO is working on an auto notifications pilot trialling vacancy holders getting additional emails at advert live, sift and interview stages. These remind them to complete the activity within the target time frame.

CO is reviewing reasonable adjustments in the recruitment process. This work includes developing principles for sharing interview questions in advance.

SCS Recruitment (including External by Default)

CO ran 97 SCS campaigns between July 2023 and June 2024. 57 of these were run externally. (This data differs from SCS recruitment above, which is for the last four quarters from the time of the audit).

68 External by EbD roles have been granted Ministerial exemption since May 2022, which includes SCS1, SCS2 and SCS3 posts. The reason for these exemptions has been the need to recruit urgently due to the nature of business unit work. Business units will also run cross-government campaigns to appoint immediately and then recruit shortly after with a fair and open external campaign.

Conclusions and Recommendations

CO recorded 2 Serious breaches and 3 Technical breaches. There was reasonable usage of Exception 1 given the department's size. All 6 exceptions audited were for Exception 1 and no breaches were found.

There was a good demonstration of efforts to enhance recruitment diversity, with continual improvement in this area from leadership over, and participation in, several programmes.

SCS recruitment was higher than usual after the election partly due to business units requiring candidates to have security clearance or experience for national security reasons. Additionally, business critical gaps required immediate appointments before a full campaign could be run, which takes longer to onboard a person to a role.

Management Action Plan

The audit identified three recommendations:

	Recommendations	Priority	Implementation Date
1	The Cabinet Office should ensure it understands the rules of the Recruitment Principles on the use of exceptions and seeks approval from the Civil Service Commission when required.	High	August 2025
2	The Cabinet Office should take steps to improve record keeping across all campaigns, in particular around sift and interview records.	Medium	August 2025
3	The Cabinet Office should take steps to ensure recruitment processes, outlined in job adverts, explain how desirable criteria is assessed.	Medium	August 2025

The Civil Service Commission will follow up with the organisation to ensure actions have been taken to address the recommendations.

Moderation Meeting

At the Moderation Meeting, held on 29 October 2024, Commissioners agreed that it was imperative for the Cabinet Office to understand the rules and how they are applied in the Recruitment Principles, further adding that they should be exemplar for the whole of the Civil Service. This was in particular relation to the use of exceptions.

It was noted by the Commissioners that senior level recruitment had broadly been run positively, though there had been some instances where pressure to proceed quickly with appointments had caused issues.

The Commissioners recognised the Cabinet Office’s strong innovation and diversity contributions.

The recommendations and audit rating were agreed. CO will be audited in 2025/26.

Audit Rating

The audit rating is determined by compliance (breaches and Exception 1 usage); positive actions (diversity and innovation) and SCS recruitment (including external by default and Commissioner insight). The weighting will also be determined by the department size – for example, larger departments will have more SCS staff than smaller departments who may not have any SCS staff.

	Breaches	Exception 1 Usage	Diversity	Innovation	SCS Recruitment
Scale: 1-5	1	3	5	4	2
Weight (100%)	40%	25%	10%	10%	15%
Sub Score	8	15	10	8	6
Total Score	47				
Rating	Needs Improvement				

Our Classification Systems

Complexity Score

- 5** **Most Complex** – largest most varied or currently most high-profile departments
- 4** **Complex** – large, varied or a high-profile department
- 3** **Average Complexity** – small, more focused departments, medium range and public profile
- 2** **Less Complex** – small department, low range and public profile
- 1** **Least Complex** – smallest departments with a focused remit

Considerations Informing Audit Rating

Compliance, Breaches, Exception 1 Usage, Diversity, Innovation, and SCS Recruitment.

Audit Ratings

Good	70-100
Fair	50-69
Needs Improvement	30-49
Needs Regulatory Intervention	20-29

Recommendations

Priority	Definition	Action Required
High	Non-compliance with the Recruitment Principles.	Remedial action must be taken taken urgently within an agreed timescale.
Medium	Impact on the legal requirement of the Recruitment Principles related to fair, open, and based on merit.	Remedial action should be prioritised within an agreed timetable.
Low	No, or minimal, impact on the legal Requirement of the Recruitment Principles related to fair, open, and based on merit.	Remedial action should be taken at earliest opportunity within an agreed timetable.