



Department for Education

Audit Report

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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 6 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 6 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 to include 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 Department for Education is a ministerial department. It is responsible for children's services and education, including early years, schools, higher and further education policy, apprenticeships and wider skills in England.

- **Headcount:** 7,300 (March 2024) – excludes 18 agencies and public bodies
- **Appointments:** 1,219
- **Exceptions:** 63
- **SCS1 and SCS2 Commissioner led competitions:** 27

The Department for Education's audit was in June 2024.

The Department for Education's Complexity Score is 4. This reflects a standard score for a large, varied or a high-profile department. The organisation was content with this score.

The Department for Education was fully engaged with the audit throughout the process of information gathering and the audit meeting.

Audit Findings

The audit reviewed six campaigns and six exceptions.

Good Practice

The Department for Education ensured essential criteria were clearly stated and candidates were informed of how specifically assessments against them would take place.

Areas for Improvement

The audit identified that the department should improve clarity in job adverts and other records about meetings with Ministers. The Recruitment Principles state that it must be clear to applicants whether meetings with Ministers are for briefings purposes or whether they are part of the assessment. From the documentation received, this was not clear.

Additionally, it was not clear how practical tasks such as presentations would be assessed, and there were some minor mistakes in the job adverts.

Queries Raised

- Mistakes in the job adverts, such as the inaccuracy of subheadings.

The Department for Education agreed to look into implementing better accuracy in the future.

Additionally, it appeared a Commissioner had not been present for discussions with a Minister. The department confirmed that a Commissioner was present, so better record-keeping was recommended.

Breaches of the Recruitment Principles

The audit identified one Serious breach and three Technical breaches.

1. Serious breach from a campaign in which candidates were assessed against different criteria than advertised.
2. Technical breach because candidates were assessed on unadvertised criteria.
3. Technical breach due poor record-keeping on sift scores.
4. Technical breach due to poor record keeping related to wrong candidate being recorded under 'Failed to attend'.

Exceptions

The audit reviewed the following six exceptions:

- **Exception 1:** G7 highly specialist skills for 2 years. Technical expertise to mitigate risks.
- **Exception 2:** G6 Secondment for 6 months. Cover for specialist lawyer.
- **Exception 3:** HEO fixed term appointment for 3 months. Specialist skill for ambassador role.
- **Exception 4:** SCS3 highly specialist skills for 14 months. Skills to work on MDT pilot.
- **Exception 5:** SCS2 Secondment for 12 months. Skills not found in civil service.
- **Exception 6:** EO on GFIE scheme. Supporting the life chances scheme.

Exception 1 usage

- **Total (2023/24):** 33

This is a low use of Exception 1 for a department of this complexity score. An Exception 1 appointment was audited and evidenced use in line with the intended purpose of Exception 1 (fill a role of short duration making open competition impracticable).

The Department for Education uses a spreadsheet to record start and end dates, salary and whether they need approval or have approval. If paid on Workday, the department record this as an exception. When they are due to expire, they go to a panel for a decision.

Diversity, Innovation and SCS Recruitment

Diversity

The Department for Education approaches schools directly, targeting areas of deprivation near to office site-hubs with a focus on building a community within the areas that they are located in. They also work through programmes with the Government Economic Service and Government Social Research to set up outreach activities in schools and colleges.

The department is responsible for the cross-government Care Leavers Scheme. Work is directed by the 2022-26 Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, and the Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan 2023-24. It is compulsory practice for their panels to be diverse.

Innovation

The Department for Education has a centralised entry level recruitment model, which means all approved EA and EO roles are assessed by a dedicated team who recommend candidates from GFIE schemes such as the Care Leaver Internship prior to any external adverts being made live.

The department has an undergraduate placement scheme in Commercial Policy, and runs insight fairs. They have also purchased a LinkedIn recruiter contract which allows them to utilise social media to reach a wider variety of people.

SCS Recruitment (including External by Default)

The Department for Education had 31 Fair and Open SCS competitions.

There were 46 ministerial exceptions to External by Default, relating to managed moves from existing SCS, EOIs (for a short time frame whilst a permanent recruitment campaign is underway), and utilising existing reserve lists.

There is a limit for length of time someone can take an interim role at SCS level of 3 months

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Department for Education had a high number of breaches. There was adequate use of Exception 1 compared to departments of the same complexity. There was strong evidence of positive practice in relation to diversity and innovation. There was also a high use of exceptions to External by Default due to the Serious breaches.

The department had experienced high turnover towards the end of 2023, which saw the departure of experienced staff. Now fully staffed, the team is still relatively new and therefore training is a focus point.

The Commission offered its assistance with delivering training once the department has identified the topics and areas to be addressed.

Management Action Plan

The audit identified three recommendations:

	Recommendations	Priority	Implementation Date
1	The Department for Education should take steps to improve record keeping across all campaigns.	High	December 2024
2	The Department for Education should ensure Private Offices and HR teams are fully aware of the requirement that Commissioners should be present for ministerial meetings with candidates for roles in which they are involved.	High	December 2024
3	The Department for Education should take steps to ensure recruitment processes, outlined in job adverts, are consistent with the assessment process.	Medium	December 2024

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

Moderation Meeting

The Moderation Meeting, held on 15 July 2024, noted concerns from the Commissioners on the department's high level of breaches. On the department's innovation, it was noted that the trialling of pre-sifts within SCS recruitment, where a subset of the panel would offer views on longlisting showed the department was receptive to guidance on such approaches.

The Commissioners reviewed the Exception 1 Usage and agreed a score of 4. It was noted that the department has self-declared some breaches.

It was also noted that historically the department always had high Exceptions usage due to the need for educational experts with skills not found in the Civil Service, which should not negatively impact the department’s rating.

A further audit was recommended in 2025.

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	4	4	4	3
Weight (100%)	40%	25%	10%	10%	15%
Sub Score	8	20	8	8	9
Total Score			53		
Rating	Fair				

Our Classification Systems

Complexity Score

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

Considerations Informing Audit Rating

- Compliance, Exception Usage, Positive Action, SCS Recruitment; and Other

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 or the Civil Service Commission.	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.