



Forestry Commission

Audit Report

April 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 Forestry Commission (FC) is a non-ministerial department, sponsored by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which increases the value of woodlands to society and the environment. FC is supported by two agencies and public bodies.

- **Headcount:** 760 (November 2024)
- **Number of appointments (last four quarters):** 371
- **Number of Exceptions issued (last four quarters):** 21
- **Number of SCS1+2 / Commissioner-led competitions (last four quarters):** 0/0

The FC audit was in November 2024.

The FC Complexity Score is 1. This reflects a standard score for the largest departments, with a varied or current high profile. FC engaged positively throughout the audit process.

Audit Findings

The audit reviewed six campaigns and six exceptions.

Good Practice

FC clearly outlined how candidates would be sifted if a large volume of applications was received.

FC recorded a declaration of interest during an interview and actively took steps to mitigate the risk of unfair assessment of candidates known to the panel member.

Areas for Improvement

FC should ensure that quality checks are carried out before advertisement. One advert included an exclusionary statement error stating that the *'vacancy is open to employees who were appointed to the Civil Service on merit following a fair and open competition or were appointed to a permanent Civil Service post'*.

FC should clearly outline what will be assessed at sift and interview stages, for example how essential and desirable criteria will be used to assess candidates.

FC should ensure all candidate outcomes are recorded within the interview records, including non-attendance, withdrawals, and candidate outcomes following assessment centres.

Queries Raised

In all six campaigns, CSC requested further information on what criteria was assessed and how, as panel records did not clearly state this. FC provided further information, which resulted in the application of several breaches due to the assessment of unadvertised criteria and not assessing the advertised criteria. FC agreed to ensure information is clear on what is being assessed.

Three campaigns required candidates to have a driving licence. CSC queried the importance of this and whether this was an exclusionary practice. FC provided justifiable reasoning for this requirement due to the nature of responsibilities and tasks requiring frequent travel to multiple, often rural, sites.

Breaches of the Recruitment Principles

Four Serious breaches were identified in the audit. One Serious breach related to the use of an exclusionary statement, stating that the vacancy was only open to internal candidates; One Serious breach related to the Fair principle - candidates were scored for *'goodness of fit'*. Two Serious breaches were for the assessment of unadvertised criteria - these were: *'use of programming language'*; and *'model of frequency distribution'*.

Five Technical breaches were identified in the audit. Four Technical breaches were for assessing CVs on unadvertised criteria. One Technical breach related to assessing unadvertised behaviours at sift whilst advertised behaviours were not assessed.

Four Serious breaches were recorded outside of the audit on the multiple recruitment campaigns. Two Serious breaches were for moving candidates across different campaigns. One Serious breach was for a failure to pause the campaign when breaches were already identified. One Serious breach was for offering candidates one interview when they had applied on multiple campaigns.

Exceptions

The audit reviewed the following six exceptions:

- **Exception 1:** EO temporary appointment (Exception 1) for 12 months.
- **Exception 2:** HEO temporary appointment (Exception 1) for 7 months.
- **Exception 3:** AO temporary appointment (Exception 1) for 12 months.
- **Exception 4:** AO temporary appointment (Exception 1) for 5 months.
- **Exception 5:** AO temporary appointment (Exception 1) for 6 months.
- **Exception 6:** AO temporary appointment (Exception 1) for 6 months.

Exception 1 usage

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

FC had 21 Exception 1 appointments. Six of these exceptions were audited and evidenced Exception 1 was being used in line with its intended purpose.

Diversity, Innovation and SCS Recruitment

Diversity

FC have started a project to build up a media library of staff from diverse backgrounds and roles in order to improve visual representation for use with job advertisements, webpages, reports and social media content.

FC uses diversity job boards and HR teams check the wording of adverts to ensure inclusive language.

FC sponsored two staff members to participate in the Stepping Up Diversity leadership programme 2023/24 which aims to unlock potential and develop talent while ensuring a fair representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, disabled, women and LGBTQ+ staff in positions of leadership.

Innovation

FC created and appointed a new HR Advisor role with a focus on improvement and streamlining of recruitment activity and with particular emphasis on apprenticeships and life chance schemes.

SCS Recruitment (including External by Default)

There was no SCS recruitment in the last four complete quarters.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Four Serious Breaches and five Technical breaches were confirmed in the audit. Four Serious breaches were also recorded outside of the audit.

21 Exception 1 appointments with six audited in line with the intended purpose.

FC had good examples of diversity including a media library of staff with diverse backgrounds and adverts using inclusive language. FC will look to focus on improvement on apprenticeships and life chance schemes.

No SCS recruitment.

Management Action Plan

The audit identified seven recommendations:

	Recommendations	Priority	Implementation Date
1	FC should continue to work with the Commission to ensure compliance when running multiple recruitment campaigns in different geographical areas and in the use of reserve lists.	High	October 2025
2	FC should continue to work with the Commission to understand the Recruitment Principles and how these relate to the Fair principle, and in particular, around the use of exclusionary criteria.	High	October 2025
3	FC should evidence, in future audits, further new or ongoing work to develop diversity and innovation in their recruitment practices.	Medium	October 2025
4	FC should take steps to ensure that candidates are provided with greater clarity in relation to expectations at application, sift and interview stages.	Medium	October 2025
5	FC should take steps to ensure criteria is assessed as advertised and to not assess unadvertised criteria.	Medium	October 2025
6	FC should take steps to reduce errors in job adverts and role packs.	Medium	October 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 in March 2025, Commissioners suggested FC should be encouraged to seek guidance from the Commission to understand how to recruit compliantly. Additionally, the Commissioners noted FC's preference to increase their complexity score. However, the Commissioners concluded the department was too small for the CSC to consider increasing their score. The recommendations and audit rating were agreed.

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	2	4	2	3
Weight (100%)	40%	25%	10%	10%	15%
Sub Score	8	10	8	4	9
Total Score	39				
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.