

**NINTH REPORT TO THE MINISTER FOR PUBLIC
EXPENDITURE AND REFORM
FROM THE
TOP LEVEL APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE (TLAC)
2020
DEVELOPMENTS & TRENDS**



REPORT TO THE MINISTER

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Introduction and Background

The Top Level Appointments Committee (TLAC) is a non-statutory committee, established by Government in 1984. This created for the first time an open, competitive process for the nomination of candidates to be appointed to some of the most senior positions in the Civil Service, at the level of Assistant Secretary, Deputy Secretary and Secretary General.

In practice, it should be noted, the appointment of Secretaries General in the Departments of An Taoiseach, Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, Foreign Affairs as well as the appointment of the Secretary General to the President are not the subject of the TLAC competitive process. These posts are filled by direct government appointment on the basis of “expressions of interest” from senior civil servants.

The TLAC processes replaced a system that operated from the foundation of the State in which senior posts were filled without an open process by Ministers or Government, usually on the recommendations of senior members of the service and with a strong emphasis on seniority.

It is the role of TLAC to recommend suitable candidates, while actual appointments are made by Ministers and Government. In every instance during 2020 the Committee’s recommendations were accepted and implemented.

In 2012 TLAC was restructured to further ensure its independence and transparency. It now comprises 7 external members, one of whom acts as chair, and 6 members from within the civil service, thus maintaining a majority of non-civil servants. All members are appointed by the Taoiseach on the nomination of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. This is the ninth annual report to the Minister under current TLAC structures.

TLAC operates under license, granted to the Public Appointments Service, (PAS) by the Commission for Public Service Appointments.

The annual report affords an opportunity to reflect on the work of TLAC, allowing stakeholders to assess its activities and performance, identifying trends and monitoring outcomes.

This is my 2nd report as chair of TLAC, having been appointed in November 2019. I would also like to acknowledge the service of those TLAC members who finished their term during the year (details are set out further in the report.) I have been given the privilege of leading a team of committed and talented members, who have given generously of their time and expertise.

Ms. Ann Higgins provides a Secretariat to TLAC that is wise, thoughtful, and meticulously attentive to detail and committed to the highest values of the public service.

Our colleagues in the Public Appointments Service, led by their Chief Executive Officer, Shirley Comerford, support TLAC in many different ways and we rely greatly upon them. I would like to acknowledge their professionalism, commitment, and unfailing courtesy in our common endeavours.

Operating the TLAC processes through the Covid-19 pandemic has presented particular challenges to committee members, staff and candidates alike. Where circumstances have permitted and where public health requirements could be fully met, TLC continued to conduct “physical interviews.” A suitably spacious location was used and all safety and health measures were stringently adhered to.

However, in many other cases, interview processes had to be conducted using remote, audio-visual technology. I would like to acknowledge the special efforts made by all to ensure that these arrangements could be operated successfully. In

particular, I would like to acknowledge the great support and skill of the technology and communications staff involved.

Conor Brady
Chair TLAC

May 2021

OVERVIEW 2020

The overall standard of candidates presenting for interview during 2020 was very high. Candidates invariably coped very well with the additional challenge, in many cases, of having to present remotely rather than in person. In a great many instances, more than one of the candidates presenting at final interview would have been considered suitable for appointment.

The Committee may recommend up to three candidates, in alphabetical order, as suitable for appointment at Secretary General Level but members generally consider it preferable to recommend one as it also generally does with posts below the level of Secretary General. The interviewing panels' task in making a final recommendation can be difficult in these competitive circumstances. It is clear however that senior posts in the civil service continue to attract numbers of high quality candidates from all sectors.

TLAC distinguishes between general service posts and specialised posts and somewhat different procedures are applied in the selection processes. There will be independent specialist input at short-listing and preliminary interview stages for specialist posts. There are currently 53 specialist posts at Assistant Secretary grade or higher in the civil service.

(For a detailed account of how TLAC operates, see "TLAC Role and Procedures" Version May 7th 2021: Appendix 1 to this report.)

In 2020 TLAC processed 17 general service posts and 3 specialised posts, a total of 20. This compares with 17 general service posts and 7 specialised posts in 2019, a total of 24. It compares with 19 general service posts and 8 specialised posts in 2018, a total of 27. The average total posts (general service and specialised) processed each year between 2012 and 2019 was 26.

In addition to the figures detailed above, TLAC operated a modified process, in collaboration with PAS and the Department of Foreign Affairs, during 2020, to identify and recommend candidates for appointment to the grade of Assistant Secretary within that department.

Final interviewing, over a number of days in December, resulted in 13 candidates being recommended for inclusion on a panel from which DFA vacancies at Assistant Secretary grade will be filled over a two year period. At this writing 3 appointments have been made from the panel and 3 more are imminent.

In response to a request from the Chief Justice, Mr Justice Frank Clarke, in April 2020, TLAC also provided a member to participate in the selection process for the appointment of a Secretary to the Judicial Council.

Recommendations for appointment were made in 2020 by the interview panels for all 17 general service posts in the civil service. Recommendations were made for all 3 specialised posts.

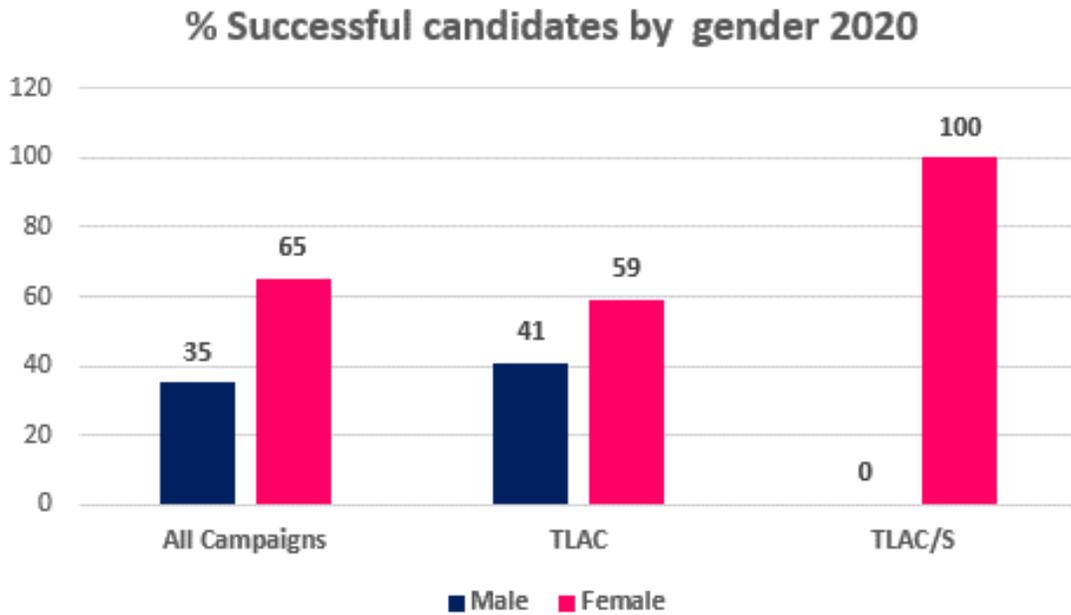
In 2020 there were 943 eligible applications for 20 posts, an average of 47. Of these 465 came from the private sector. In 2018 there were 23 applications on average for each post. Over the previous 7 years the average had been 29. In 2019 there were 629 applicants for 24 posts, an average of 26 per post.

The 2020 figure here is unusually high, again, perhaps reflecting economic adversity and higher unemployment figures in the community. One post attracted 157 eligible applications, of which 97 came from the private sector. Another post attracted 133 eligible applications with 92 coming from the private sector.

Gender Balance

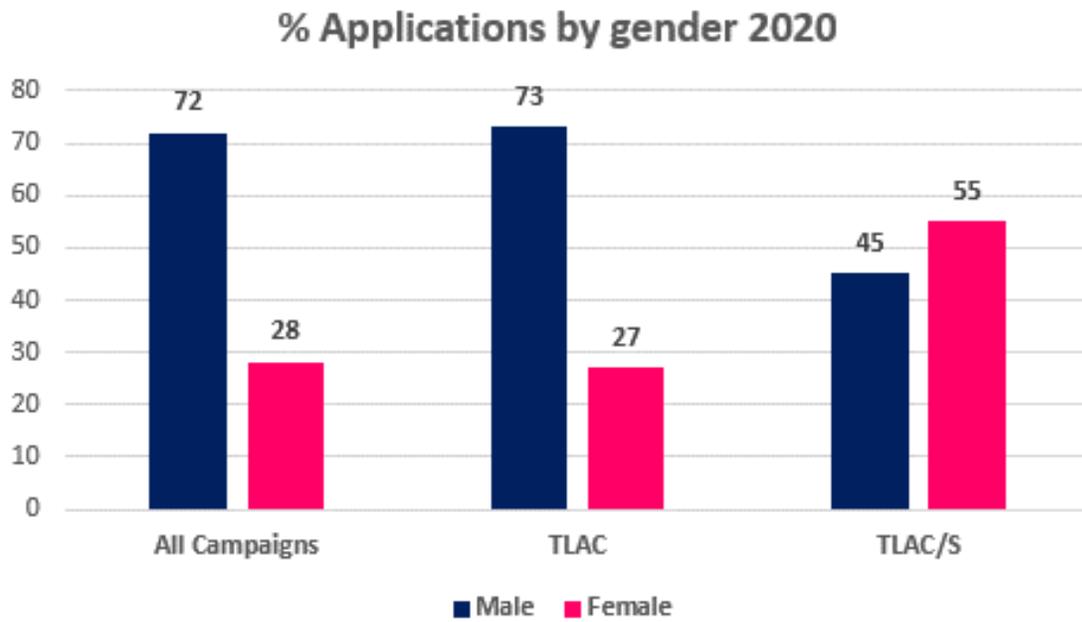
It is Government policy to encourage gender diversity in the civil service, aiming to close the gender gap in top positions.

Of 20 TLAC recommendations for appointment in 2020, 13 (or 59%) were female and 7 (or 41%) were male.

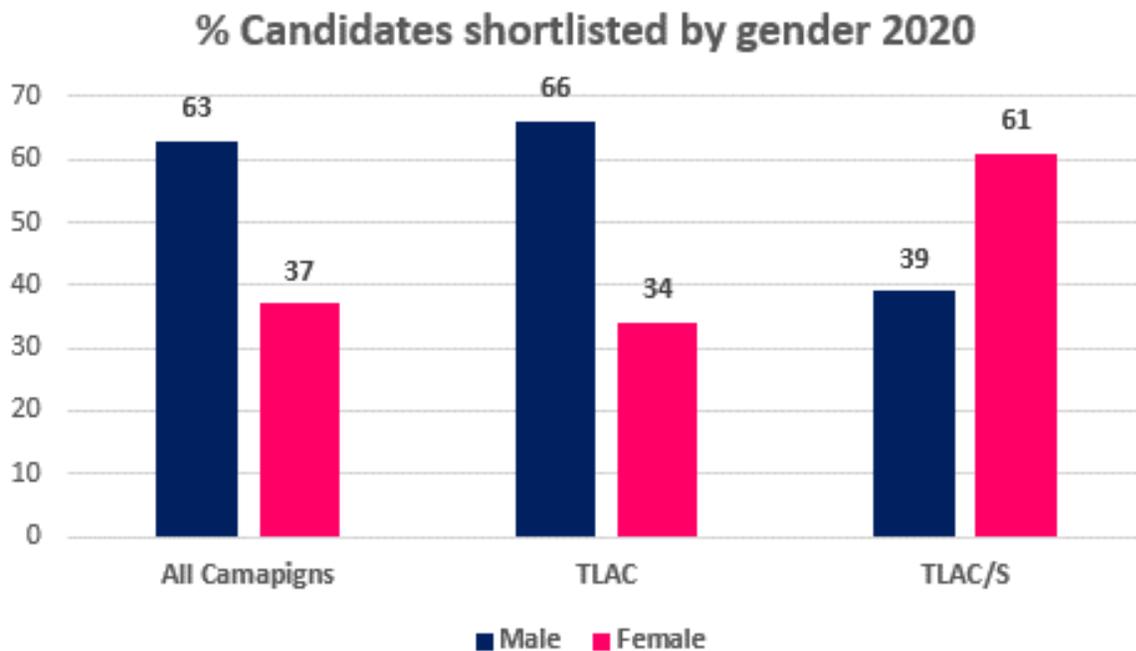


This figure reverses the trend for 2019, when 62% of all recommendations were male and 38% were female.

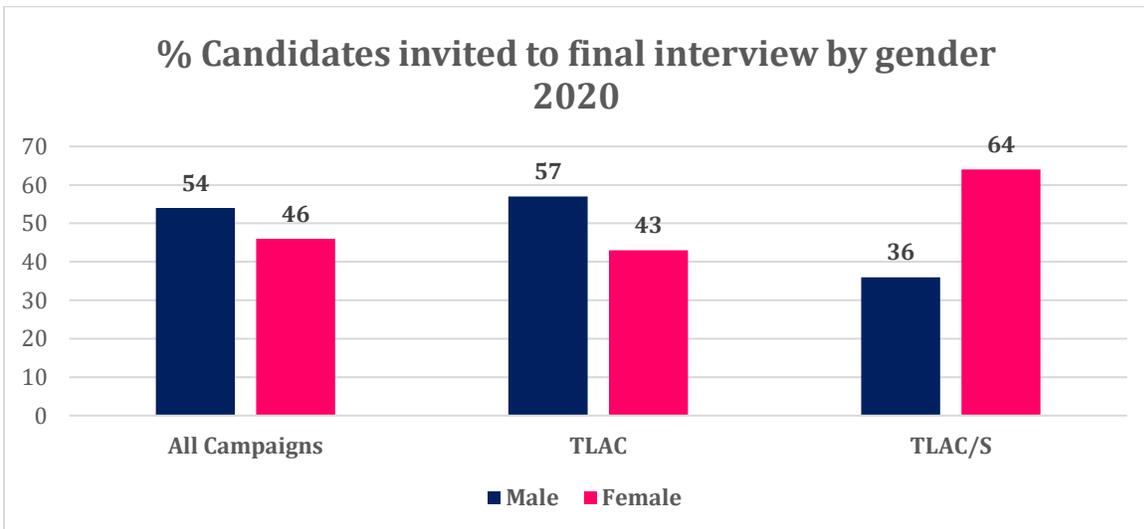
Of the candidates who applied for TLAC posts in 2020, 73% were male and 27% were female.



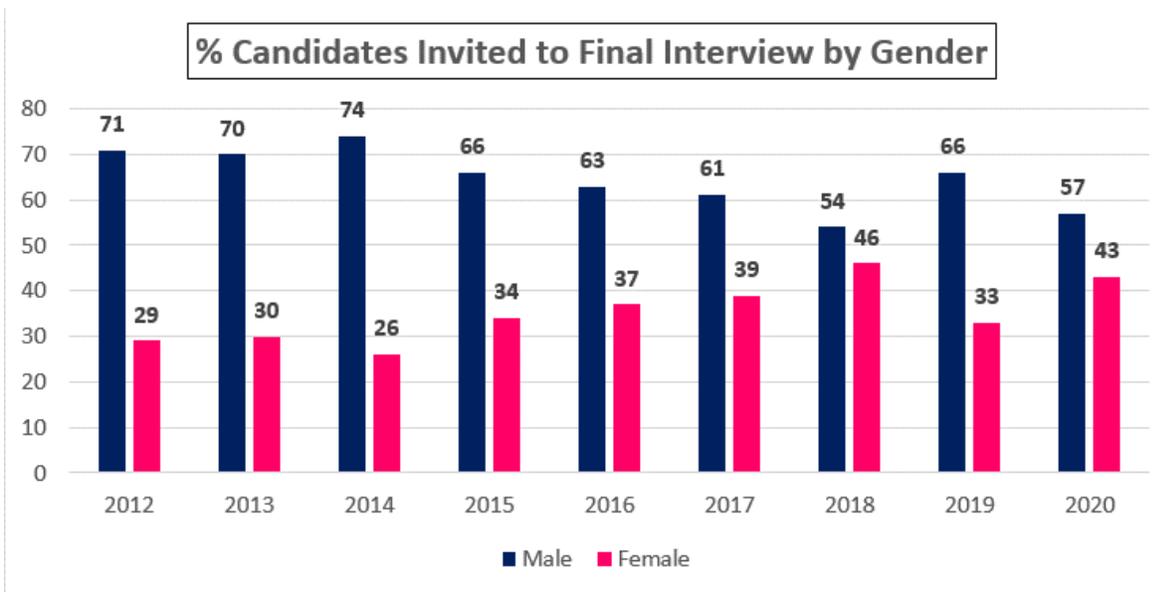
Of the candidates shortlisted for preliminary interview in 2020, 66% were male and 34% were female.



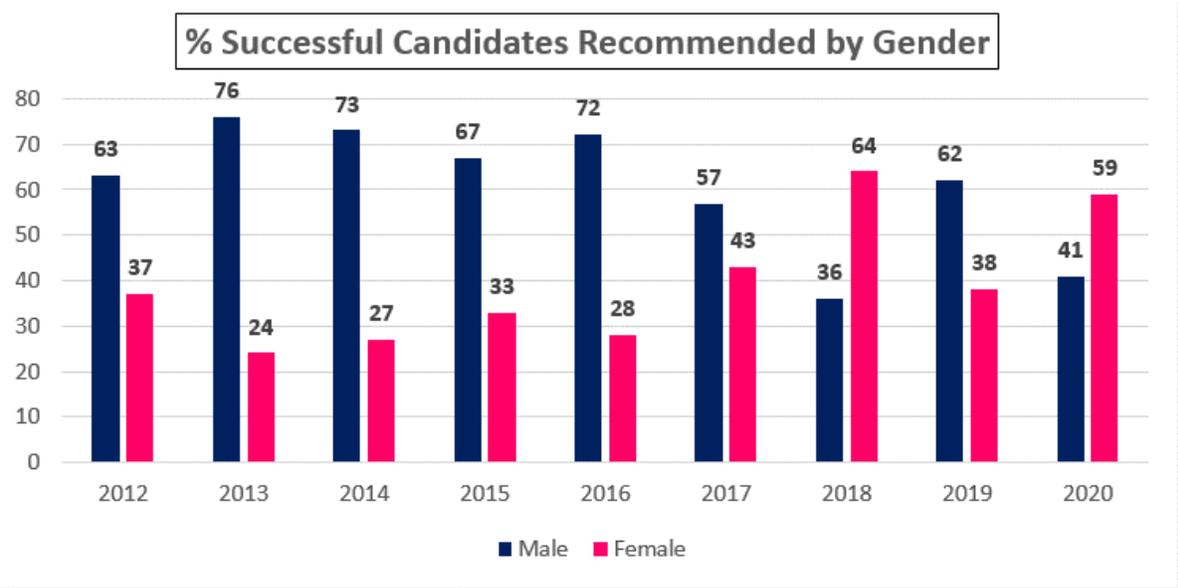
Of the candidates sent forward for final interview in 2020, 57% were male and 43% were female.



In each year from 2014 to 2018, the numbers and proportion of females making it through to final interview had increased while the numbers and proportion of males had reduced.



In each year from 2013 to 2018, the numbers and proportion of females recommended for appointment had increased and the numbers and proportion of males had reduced.



In 2018, for the first time ever, more women than men had been appointed to the top two grades in the civil service.

In last year’s report, however, it was noted that 2019 had seen a deviation from the trend in that 62% of all recommendations for appointment were male.

It is noteworthy that although males outnumber females at application stage in a ratio of almost 3:1, each stage of the process sees a greater proportion of females going forward to the next level. As the figures above show, when it came to recommendation for appointment in 2020, females outnumbered males in a ratio of almost 2:1.

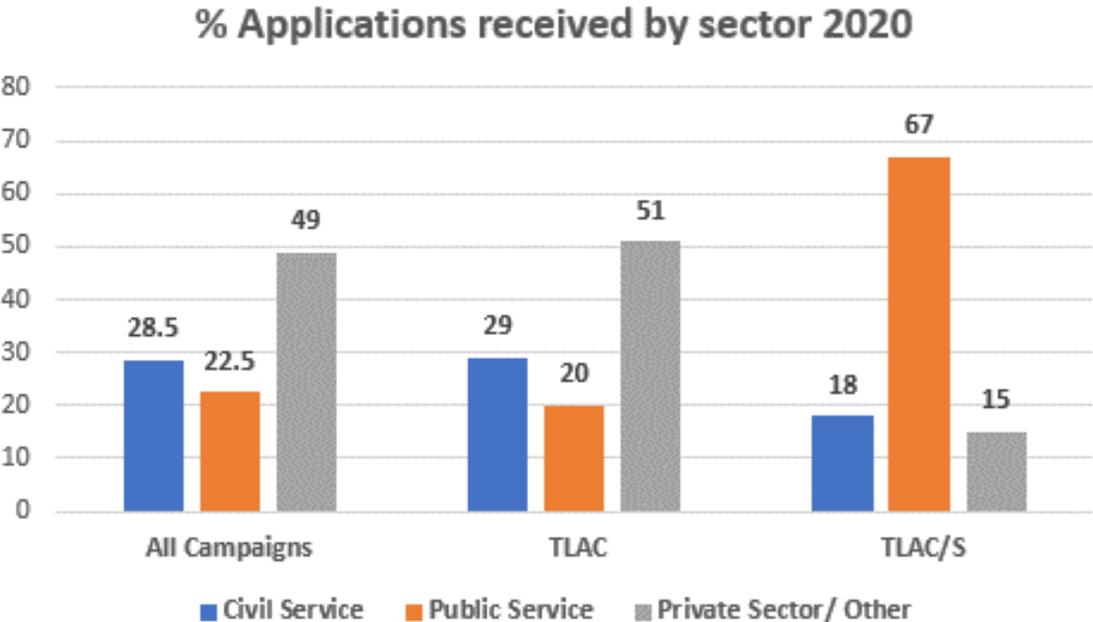
Diversity of the Applicant Pool

The strength of the applicant pool is necessarily a key ingredient in successful selection by TLAC.

However, the data shows that while the applicant pool is diverse in gender it is much less so by other criteria. No data is available on ethnicity, nationality, or other forms of diversity but it would be more than desirable to have this available in the future. Indeed, as members of ethnic minorities advance in the civil service and in other sectors of the workforce it will be essential to have such data. At this writing, no members of any minority ethnic group have come through the TLAC process.

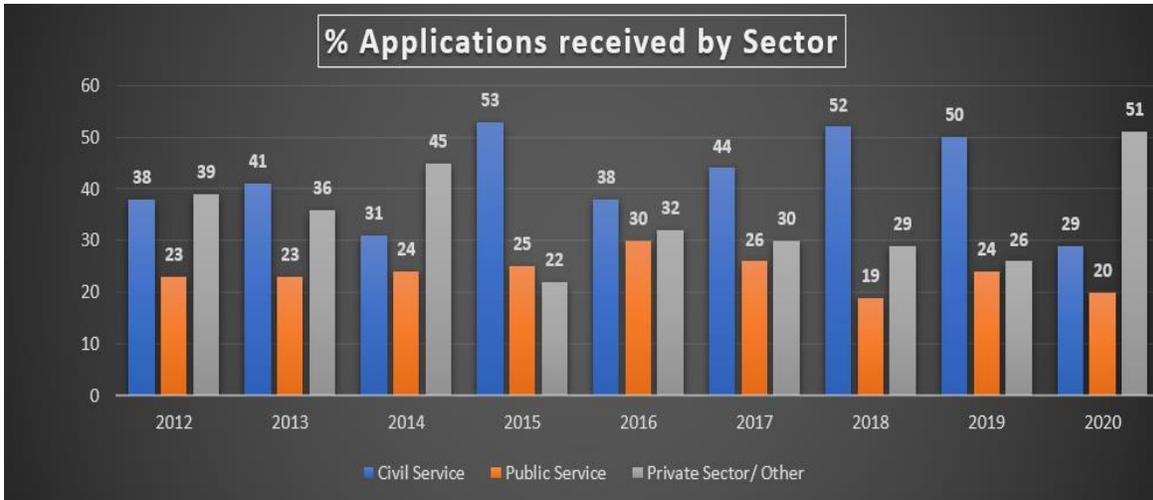
Diversity is an important strength of the current pool. An area of concern in recent years had been the falling numbers of applications as measured in terms of average applications per role advertised, although this has reversed significantly in 2020.

The largest cohort of applicants for TLAC posts, in 2020 came from the private sector, representing 51% of all applicants. The Civil Service provided 29% of applicants and 20% came from the wider public service.

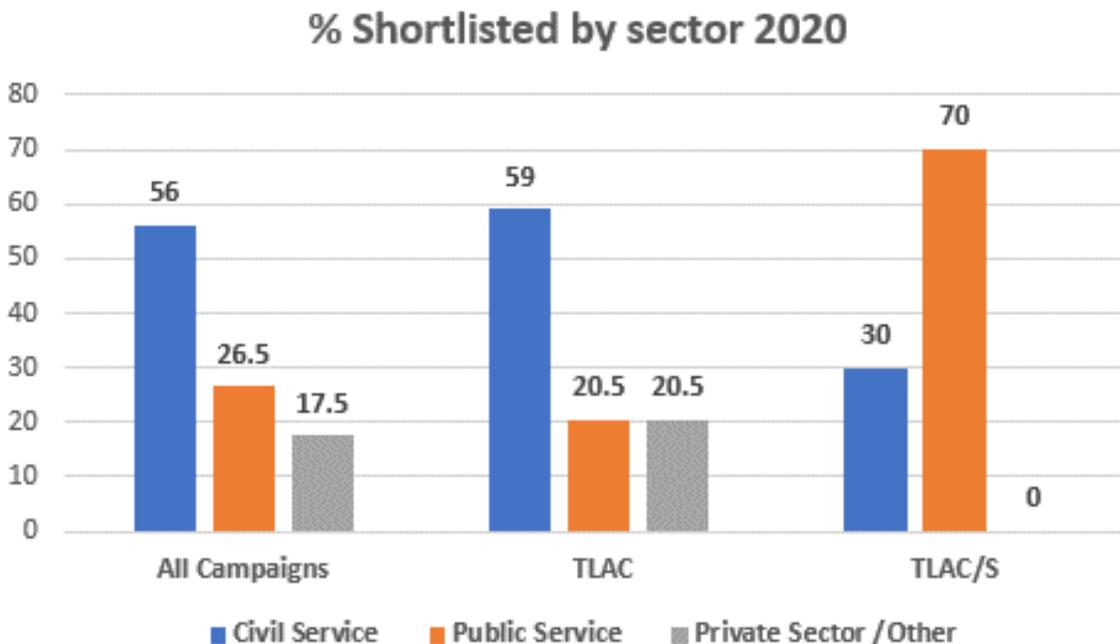


In 2019, 50% of applicants came from within the civil service. In the same year 24% came from the wider public service and 26% came from the private sector.

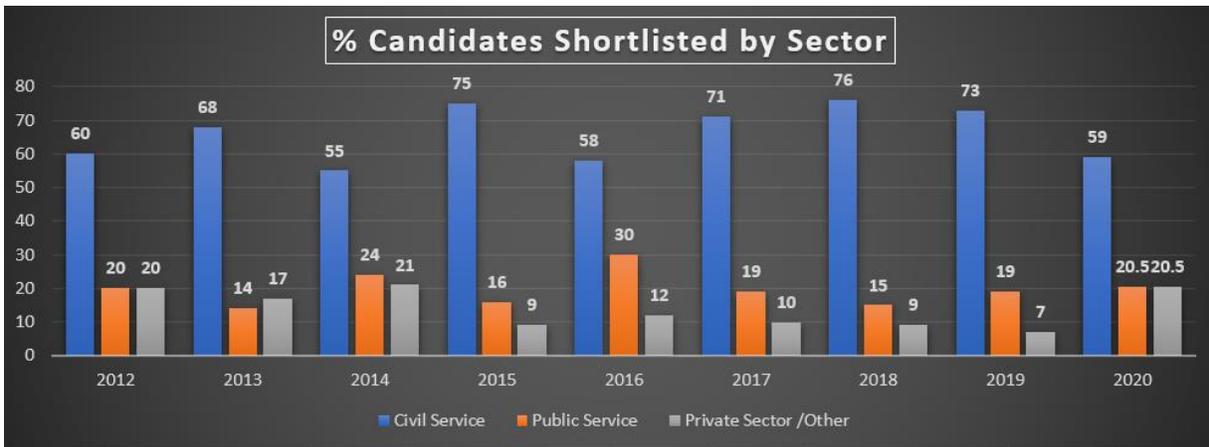
In 2018, 52% of the applicants came from the civil service, 19% from the public service and 29% from the private sector.



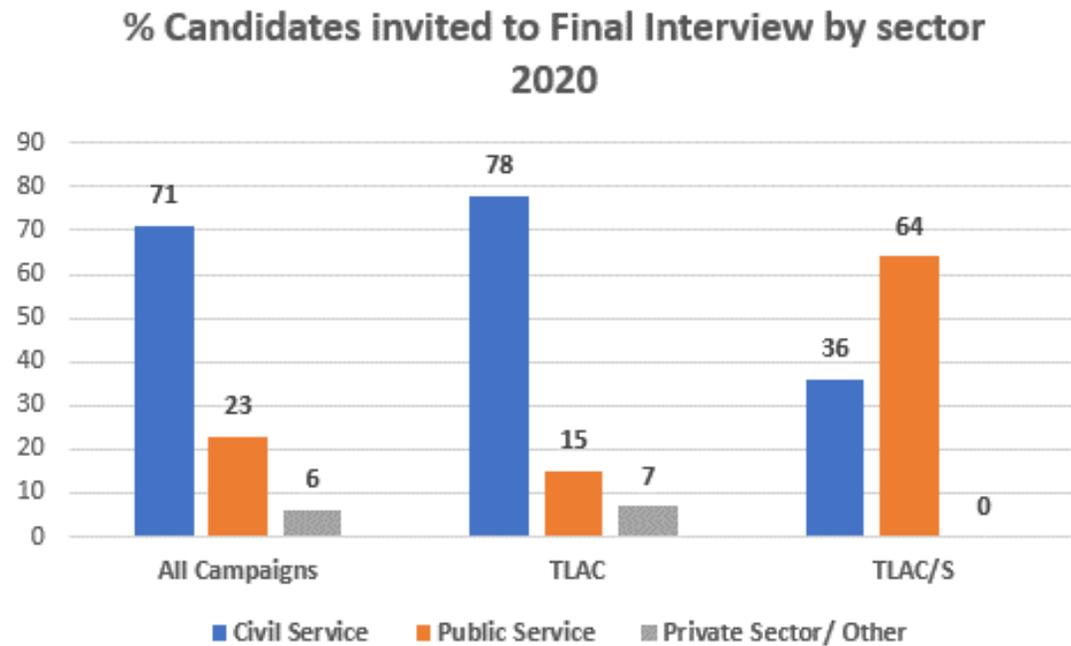
Of those shortlisted in 2020 59% were from the Civil Service. The wider public service and the private sector each provided 20.5% of those shortlisted.



Of those shortlisted in 2019, 73% were civil servants while 19% were public servants. However just 7% of those shortlisted were from the private sector.

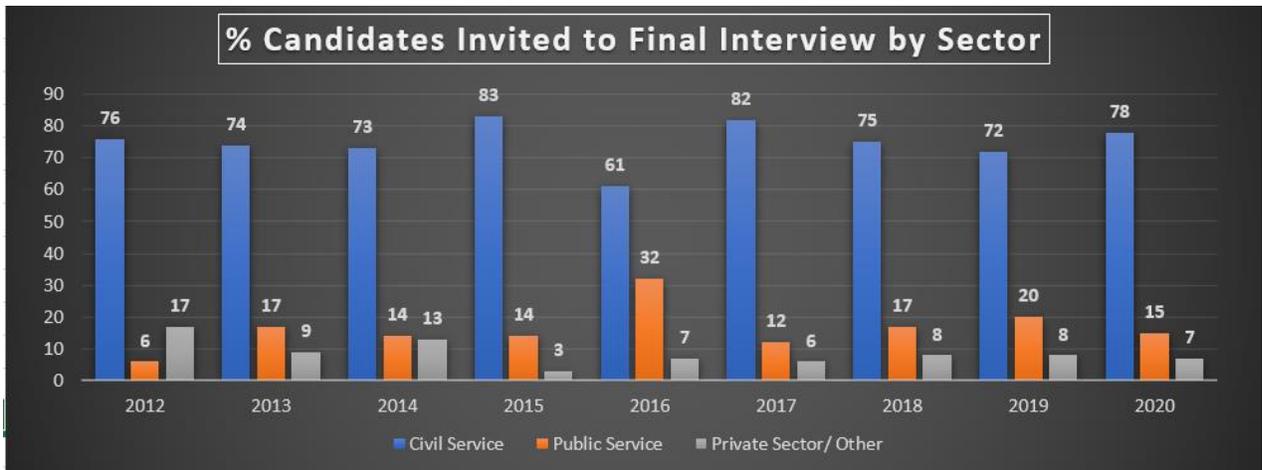


Of those sent forward for final interview in 2020, 78% were civil servants. 15% were from the public service and 7% were from the private sector.

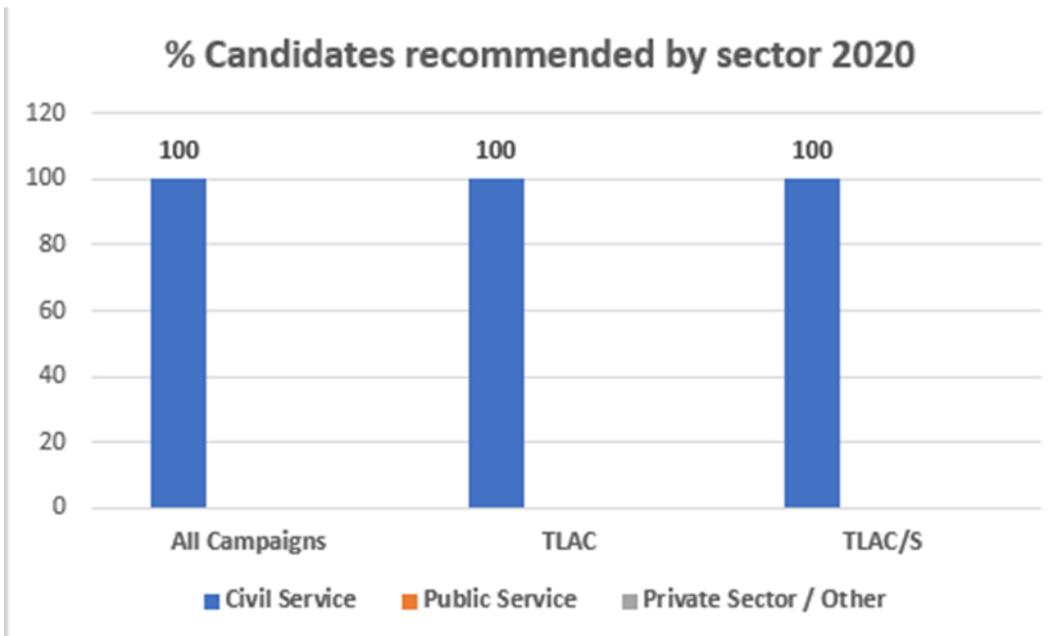


Of those sent forward to final interview in 2019, 72% were civil servants, 20% were public servants and 8% were from the public sector.

In the previous year, 2018, 75% of those sent forward to final interview were civil servants, 17% were from the public service and 8% were from the private sector.



Of those recommended for appointment in 2020, 100% were civil servants. No candidate from the public or private sector was recommended for appointment in 2020.

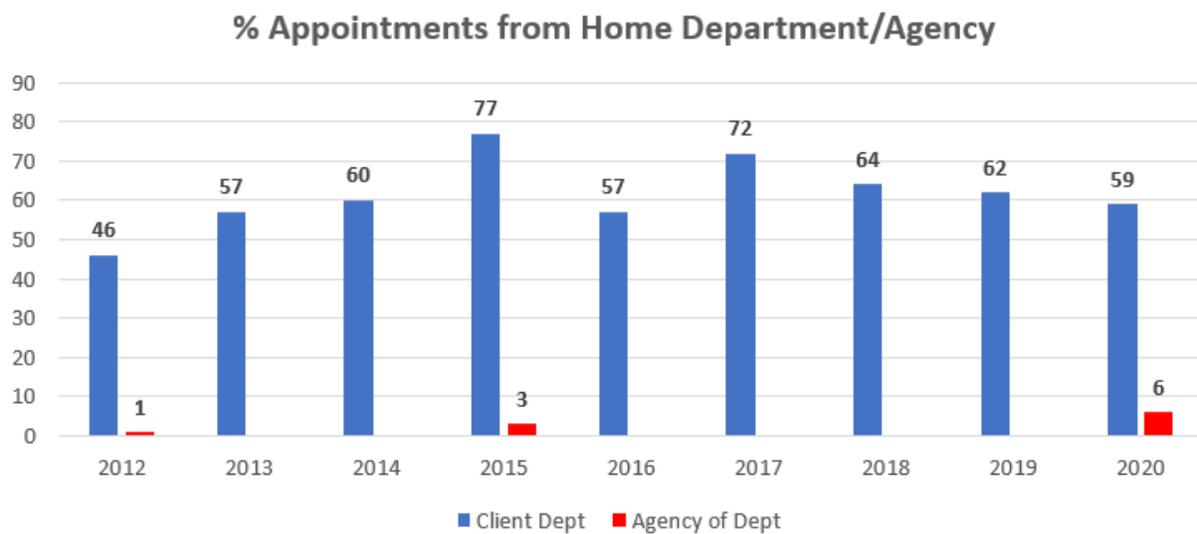


Of those recommended for appointment to TLAC posts in 2019, 86% were civil servants, 5% were public servants and 9% came from the private sector.

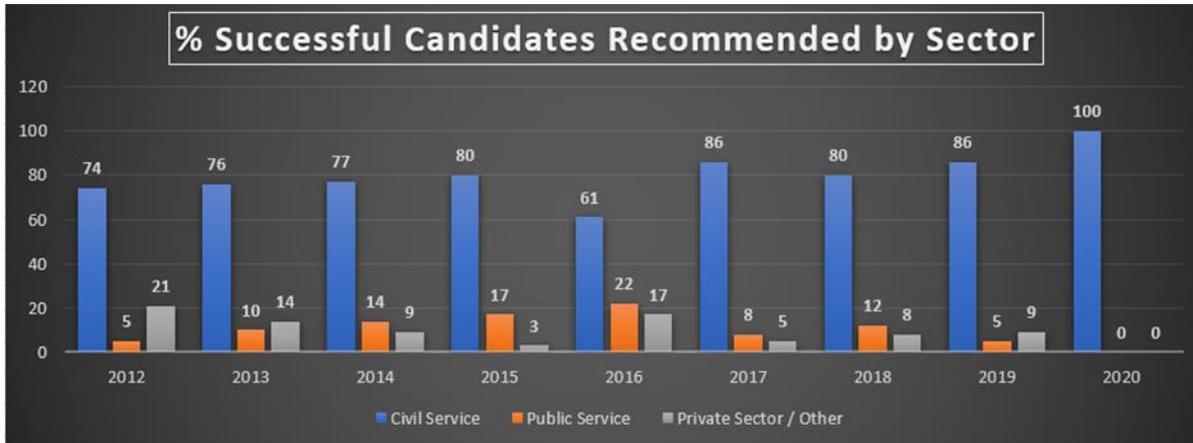
Of those recommended for appointment in 2020, 65% came from within the “hiring” department or one of its agencies. In 2019 this figure was 62% and in 2018 it was 64%.

Over the period since 2012 the average percentage of appointments recommended from within “hiring” departments or their agencies has been 62%.

Of those recommended for appointment in regard to the 24 posts processed in 2019, 12 came from within the hiring department or one of its agencies, 6 from other departments within the civil service, while 3 came from outside the civil service. In 3 cases no appointment was made.



In 2018, 80% of those recommended for appointment were from the civil service, 12% were from the public service and 8% from the private sector.



These figures disclose a broadly consistent pattern over the past 7 years. Although more than 70% of all applicants in 2020 came from outside the civil service, with more than 50% coming from the private sector, the success rate in securing recommendation for appointment is highest by far for civil servants, coming from within their parent department or one of its agencies.

In summary, although civil servants comprised just 29% of the candidate pool in 2020, they comprised 100% of those recommended for appointment. Public servants comprised 20% of the applicant pool but none of these were recommended for appointment. The private sector provided 51% of the applicant pool but none of these were recommended for appointment.

It is difficult to say what mix of backgrounds is “right” in the upper echelons of the civil service. A greater variety of career backgrounds and experience should serve to broaden the service’s capacities. But it is also necessary to have continuity, strong corporate memory and specialised knowledge.

Nonetheless, it is clear that by far the largest single cohort securing senior appointments comprises candidates coming from within the civil service itself, more often than not (59%) from within the departments in which vacancies have arisen.

In 2020 no candidate from the private sector was recommended for appointment by TLAC although 51% of applicants came from that sector. This has never happened before since 2012 when TLAC was given its present configuration.

The proportion of candidates from the private sector recommended for appointment has declined more or less consistently since 2012. In 2012, for example, 21% of those recommended for appointment came from the private sector. In 2015 that figure fell to 17% and in 2017 it fell to 5%. In 2019 it was 9%.

Were this trend to continue over time it would bode ill for the diversity and, in time, the effectiveness of the civil service.

It is not clear what factors have influenced this trend. It would, however, appear that public service vacancies now attract a considerable proportion of applicants who do not meet the specified qualifications.

It may be that in conditions of economic adversity more job-seekers look to the public sector for employment opportunities.

It is also likely, particularly in the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic, that Secretaries General find themselves under greater pressure to deal with immediate and pressing issues, rather than planning for the longer term. Thus, in setting down the desired qualifications and the tasks to be faced, there may be a greater emphasis on immediately relevant skills rather than on widespread and diverse experience in seeking to fill senior vacancies.

TLAC Specialist posts

There were 3 TLAC Specialist competitions completed in 2020. In all cases candidates were recommended for appointment. All of those recommended were female. Over the period 2012 to 2020 there were 40 specialist posts, an average of

4.4 per annum. In some years, there may be none. The specialist areas in respect of which vacancies arose in 2020 were the Office of the DPP, the Department of Health and the National Council for Curriculum and Development.

In 2020, 45% of applicants for specialist posts were male and 55% were female. In 2019, 79% of applicants were male and 21% were female. In 2018, 68% were male and 32% were female.

Two of those recommended for appointment to specialist posts in 2020 were from within the civil service and one was from the wider public service.

How TLAC Works

- The role of TLAC is to support the Government objective that the recruitment and selection process for the most senior Civil Service positions is accessible to the widest pool of qualified candidates from all sectors.
- TLAC identifies the best candidate(s) for each position, judging each one on his/her suitability, in the context of the post to be filled, and against the other candidates who are in competition for it.
- TLAC then makes recommendations to the relevant Minister or to Government as appropriate.
- TLAC operates under the *Code of Practice for Appointments to Positions in the Civil Service and Public Service*, in accordance with the principles of merit, consistency, accountability, probity, best practice and professional confidentiality.
- TLAC operates in an independent manner and strictly on the basis of open competition and merit.
- Subject to certain exceptions, principally those set out in the introduction to this report, TLAC deals with all posts at and above Assistant Secretary level or equivalent in the Civil Service.

TLAC Structure

The membership of the Top Level Appointments Committee (TLAC) comprises 7 external members and 6 internal members, maintaining a majority of non-civil servants. The 13 members are comprised of, (i) the Secretary General, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform; (ii) the Secretary General to the Government; (iii) 4 other senior civil servants appointed for three year terms ; (iv) 7 members from outside the Civil Service appointed for 3 year terms, 1 of whom is the chairperson.

TLAC members are nominated by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and appointed by the Taoiseach.

The Membership of the TLAC Committee in 2020 was as follows:

- Mr Conor Brady (chairperson); former editor of *The Irish Times* and former Commissioner GSOC. (Mr Brady succeeded Ms Jane Williams as chair in November 2019 on the expiry of her term of office.)
- Mr Niall Cody, Chairman, Office of The Revenue Commissioners, appointed for a 3-year term in August 2020.
- Ms Barbara Cotter, Non-Executive Director and Consultant/Advisor and former partner, A&L Goodbody.
- Mr Graham Doyle, Secretary General, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.
- Mr Martin Fraser, Secretary General to the Government, Department of An Taoiseach.
- Ms Katherine Licken, Secretary General, Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.
- Mr John McKeon, Secretary General, Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, was appointed for a three year term in April 2020.
- Mr Phillip Matthews, Qualified Executive and Team Coach and former President/CEO and Board Member, National College of Ireland.
- Ms Ann O’Connell, former partner, PwC Consulting, was appointed for a three year term in September 2020.
- Mr Barry O’Connor, Former managing partner, MERC, was appointed in November 2019.
- Ms Louise Phelan, former CEO, PayPal and currently CEO, Phelan Energy Group, was appointed for a three year term in November 2020.
- Ms Fiona Tierney, Non-Executive director and former Chief Executive, Public Appointments Service (PAS) was appointed in November 2019.
- Mr Robert Watt, Secretary General, Department of Public Expenditure & Reform.

Appointments to TLAC are staggered to ensure continuity. External members receive an annual honorarium of €7,695 with the person acting as chair receiving an annual honorarium of €11,970. Internal members do not receive any payment additional to their civil service salaries.

Processes Prior to Final Interview and Selection.

When a vacancy arises, a job specification is prepared by the hiring department in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The draft specification is circulated to the TLAC membership for any observations.

The Public Appointment Service (PAS) will work with the Secretary General of the hiring department (usually referred to in this context as the “receiving Secretary General”) to ascertain the key skills required for the role and to identify the current and critical issues within the organisation that would be of particular interest to potential candidates.

TLAC has developed two frameworks setting out the key competencies which will form the basis of interviews and the assessment of candidates’ suitability. The first of these is applied to posts at Assistant Secretary level while the second applies for Secretary General posts.

The four key competencies for posts at Assistant Secretary level and which provide the framework for final interview are:

- Strategic Thinking and Vision;
- Delivery Focus and Personal Drive for Results;
- Managing Relationships;
- Specialist Expertise and Self Development;

The key competencies for posts at Secretary General level and which provide the framework for final interview are:

- Leadership;
- Judgement;
- Managing Relationships;
- Personal Drive for Results;

Appointments at the grade of Deputy Secretary are made in a small number of Departments, including Health, Foreign Affairs, Social Protection and in the Department of Justice and Equality. These appointments are made following the TLAC procedures for Assistant Secretary but candidates are asked to present on the four key competencies as set out (above) for Secretary General grade.

Further information on required competencies is to be found within the Advice Centre on the PAS website www.publicjobs.ie

Candidate information booklets are prepared by PAS in conjunction with DEPR and the hiring department. Relevant information for each post will also be available on www.publicjobs.ie. This will include job title and description, pay scale, location, closing date for applications etc. Guidance notes on preparing a CV and on the selection and interview processes are also provided.

PAS advertises all posts on selected national media, on social media and by circulating relevant professional bodies and associations.

In certain circumstances, PAS, in conjunction with TLAC, may arrange an executive search process, using retained external specialists.

After the advertised closing date, applications are shortlisted by a selection board formed by PAS. This will comprise an independent chairperson, an independent expert in the relevant area of expertise, a Secretary General (but not from the hiring Department) and a member of TLAC. The TLAC member will generally follow the competition process through to completion.

The Secretary General from the hiring department will be in attendance for Assistant Secretary level posts to provide a briefing on the role and the Department. The selection board agrees the shortlisting criteria, which is consistent with the skills, experience and competencies required for the post. The selection board reviews and assesses each application against the criteria which have been set down, and determines a shortlist of candidates who will be brought forward for further consideration at the Preliminary Interview stage.

The Selection Board will next conduct competitive preliminary interviews of those candidates who have been shortlisted. A TLAC representative will participate at this stage for Secretary General posts and specialist posts.

Suitable candidates from the preliminary interviews will then go forward to the final interview stage. They will be required to complete an Occupational Personality Questionnaire (OPQ) prepared and analysed by suitably qualified professionals retained by PAS. They will be required to nominate referees who will be asked by PAS to provide assessments of their professional competencies and their general suitability for the role to be filled.

In advance of final interview, candidates will also be required to provide TLAC *via* PAS in writing with a full *curriculum vitae* along a personal statement, setting out the reasons why they have made their application. They will be required additionally to provide a written narrative setting out their career experience in relation to the principal competencies set down for the role.

They will finally be required to make a further presentation on paper, setting out the principal points they wish to set out in relation to the fulfilment of the role, if appointed. This may be a combination of written and graphic content.

These processes will apply for both Assistant Secretary and Secretary General posts. For posts at the level of Secretary General, in-depth executive assessments, aimed at eliciting more detail than the OPQs employed at lower levels, are undertaken by suitably qualified professionals retained by PAS.

Competitive Final interview and recommendation.

The number of candidates going forward for final interview can vary. For some posts in 2020 there were up to 5. In others there were 3.

The interview panel for final TLAC interviews comprises 5 persons. Two Secretaries General will participate as will 3 external members, including the TLAC chair who will chair and conduct the interview process. The Secretary General of the hiring Department will be in attendance to brief the panel members in advance. The hiring Secretary General will have earlier furnished TLAC with a completed questionnaire setting out the key skills and challenges relating to the post.

The hiring or receiving Secretary General will be present for the interviews. He/she will not participate directly in the dialogue between the candidates and the members of the interview panel. However, once the panel members have finished, he/she may engage with the candidate and ask some questions of the candidate also.

Prior to the interviews, the panel will be verbally briefed on the content of the OPQs which have been completed by each candidate. These briefings will be delivered by a representative of PAS. A PAS representative will also brief the panel on the content of the references taken up from the persons nominated by candidates as referees.

For posts at Secretary General level there is a longer briefing to detail and describe the outcomes of the in-depth, executive assessments by suitably-qualified, independent professionals.

Between 45 minutes and 1 hour is allocated for each candidate. An hour and 15 minutes is allocated for each candidate, thus allowing for interview, discussion and assessment among panel members.

After introductions between the candidate and the members of the interview panel, the candidate is allocated 8 minutes to go through their presentation verbally. Then each member of the panel will engage him/her in conversation on one of the principal competencies.

The chair may or may not then ask additional questions.

Next, the receiving Secretary General will be invited to ask questions of the candidate.

Finally, the candidate will be afforded an opportunity to revisit anything that has come up during the course of the interview, to address anything that he/she feels has not been touched upon, or to make any final remarks.

Recommendations to Minister/Government

When the last interview has concluded, the members of the panel will confer.

The hiring Secretary General has an opportunity to offer views and the panel members may ask him/her further questions relative to the role.

Having heard the views of the hiring Secretary General, the panel will then take a final decision on its recommendation. At Secretary General level, in the event that the panel is unable to make a final adjudication, it may recommend up to three candidates, in alphabetical order, to the Minister or the Government as being suitable for appointment.

The chair will then notify the Minister in writing of the panel's recommendation. The receiving Secretary General will notify the successful candidate and the unsuccessful candidates from within the hiring department. The TLAC secretariat will notify unsuccessful candidates from outside the receiving department.

Unsuccessful candidates will be advised that they may request feedback about their interview from the Chair. This opportunity is generally if not universally availed of by interviewees. The current practice is to deliver this feedback in writing by email.

Trends and Patterns in Summary

Certain trends and patterns are identified within TLAC's processes since 2012, albeit with variations.

In 2013 and 2014, for example, applications for TLAC posts from the private sector exceeded those from within the civil service itself. In subsequent years, however, the proportion of applications from the private sector dropped. In 2019, just 25% of applicants for general service TLAC posts were from the private sector compared to 48% from the civil service. The balance of applications (26%) came from the wider public service.

In 2020, however, 51% of applicants came from the private sector, with 29% coming from the civil service and 20% coming from the wider public service.

This could suggest that civil service posts may be more attractive in a weaker economic climate and less so in a stronger economic climate. From March 2020 Covid-19 restrictions necessitated the shutting down or slowing of large sections of the economy, resulting in a sharp rise in unemployment.

Civil service applicants are much more likely to be recommended for appointment than candidates from other sectors. In 2020, 94% of those recommended for appointment were civil servants, 6% were public servants and none were from the private sector.

The figures for 2019 showed also that civil service applicants are much more likely to be recommended for appointment (82%) than either public service applicants (12%) or private sector applicants (6%). This pattern has been broadly consistent over the years 2012-2019 but 2020 was the first year when no private sector applicants were recommended for appointment.

A high proportion of those recommended for appointment tend to come from within the hiring department or one of its agencies. In 2018 64% of those recommended for appointment to general service posts came from within the department or one of its agencies. This figure is close to the average over the period 2012-2018. In 2019 62% of those recommended for appointment came from within the hiring department or one of its agencies.

Commentary

It is part of TLAC's brief to advise the Minister and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the effectiveness of appointments to senior positions in the public service. Accordingly, the following observations are presented for consideration by the Minister and the Department.

1. The TLAC process is designed to be open, fair, independent, impartial and efficacious.
2. By definition, however, there is always a judgment call to be made in nominating candidates for appointment. The role of the receiving secretary general is a sensitive but important one in the process. The secretary general does not participate in the final selection by the interview panel but the members will give careful attention to what he/she sets out as the priorities for the department and for the incoming appointee.

It sometimes appears to certain Committee members that a receiving Secretary General sees a choice to be made between a candidate who can "hit the ground running" and another candidate who might perhaps have long-term potential but who will take time to become familiar with the role.

Whether or not this observation has validity has been a matter for discussion among committee members. Some believe they can recognise it. Others disagree.

The additional pressures imposed on all departments by the Covid-19 pandemic may, however, have accentuated this tendency.

This may go some way to explaining the fact that in 2020 65% of candidates recommended for appointment came from within the “hiring” department or one of its agencies. In 2019 that figure was 62% and in 2018 it was 64%) It would be reasonable to conclude that there must be lost opportunities here to benefit from the varied career experiences and fresh thinking of outsiders.

It may be that providing additional supports for Secretaries General in relation to continuity and succession planning, where possible, once the Covid-19 pandemic has passed could help in this regard.

3. Going before a TLAC panel is invariably a challenge and, to a degree, a rite of passage in the career path of a civil servant, or indeed, for candidates outside the civil service. Every effort is made by the Committee to put candidates at ease, to be fair, courteous and to maintain consistency across the interviews, while probing the candidates’ capacities and abilities.

There is a need for some formalised system to enable TLAC to receive feedback from candidates about their experience of the process.

Discussions have taken place between TLAC and the Public Appointments Service to consider how this might best be done. At this writing, a pilot project is in hand, to be operated by PAS. This will enable PAS and TLAC to measure, initially, responses from candidates who came through the TLAC process in 2020.

4. TLAC raised concerns in earlier reports that a drop in candidate numbers, as measured by the number of applications per post, could impact upon the choice that is available for important positions. This situation changed in 2020 with 47 applications per post, compared with 26 applications per post in 2019 and 23 in 2018.

It may be that the increase in applications in 2020 is attributable, in whole or in part, to the impact of Covid-19. Time alone will tell if this is a temporary phenomenon or if it is to be the pattern for the future.

In earlier reports, TLAC suggested that some examination be undertaken to ascertain possible reasons behind the relatively low number of applications. It has been speculated that the level of reputational risk now associated with senior public roles may have impacted on the numbers in earlier years.

This situation at very least requires close monitoring and analysis.

- 5 The 2019 reverse of the earlier trend towards greater representation of women in recommendations for appointment was problematic. However, 2020 saw women recommended for 59% of available posts at TLC level.

In 2020 73% of all TLAC applicants were male with 27% females. In 2019 69% of applicants were male and 31% were female. In 2018, 68% of applicants were male and 32% were female.

In numerical terms, however, these sets are small. In 2020, 13 women were recommended for TLAC posts and 7 men. In 2019, 8 women were recommended for appointment to TLAC posts and 14 men were recommended.

6. There is still very little ethnic diversity in the pool of candidates currently coming to preliminary and final interview stage, notwithstanding an increasingly varied ethnic intake into the workforce, as documented, for example, by ESRI. It is desirable that the composition of the civil service should broadly reflect the ethnic makeup of the community.

The 2019 TLAC report urged that consideration should be given to measures that will serve to bring an appropriate number of persons of ethnic diversity to senior positions within the civil service. Measures should also be taken to track the ethnic diversity of those applying for TLAC posts. These recommendations can be reiterated at this time.

7. In 2020, 51% of those applying for TLAC posts came from the private sector. While 26% of those applying for TLAC general service posts came from the private sector in 2019 (compared to 29% in 2018). The increase in private sector applications is noteworthy.

Experience at shortlisting stage indicates that some applications from the private sector are speculative. In these cases applicants do not have the competencies or experience that are required and that have been set out in the job specifications. Thus a high rate of fallout is not to be wondered at.

Nonetheless, it should be possible and it would be useful to learn more about the reasons why private sector employees may or may not be interested in working in the civil service. If there are perceived obstacles, whether cultural – in the broad sense - financial or anything else, it would be important for the future effectiveness of the service to know what they are and to see how they might be addressed.

8. In the Introduction and Background section of the 2020 report, mention is made of the fact that TLAC processes have not in the past operated in relation to a number of Secretary General posts. These are in the Departments of An Taoiseach, Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, Foreign Affairs and the Department of the Presidency. These Secretary General posts are filled by direct government appointment after “expressions of interest” by senior civil servants.

While it has been customary that these posts, at the very centre of the administration, are filled directly by the government of the day, there is an argument to be considered for applying TLAC’s processes to these as well. TLAC has evolved from an original model established in 1985 in which all of its members were civil servants and in which there was no external input. The existing model, dating from 2012 and with a majority of external members engaged at final interview stage, reflects modern international practice and enjoys a high level of confidence among the civil service and across the administrative establishment.

Extending TLAC’s remit to include these posts would undoubtedly be welcomed by the civil service. I would suggest that it would also stand to the credit of the State were it to embrace the highest degree of transparency, openness and fair procedure across all of its senior recruitment processes.

** At the writing of this report, TLAC has been requested to conduct a competitive interview process to identify suitable candidates for appointment to the vacant post of Secretary General at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.*