



# FINDING THE PERFECT FIT

A guide to the senior recruitment process



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## INTRODUCTION

### Who should read this guide?

It's written for anyone, both elected members and officers involved in hiring senior officers in a local authority, or those seeking to be hired into Chief Executive or other senior management roles. The nature of these jobs means that recruitment processes and an individual's involvement may be infrequent and varied. Key decision makers may not have either designed or played a part in these processes before, and so this guide is aimed at them.

### Our approach

Our starting point was to speak to those at the sharp end of senior recruitment. We are very grateful to more than 50 elected members and senior officers who gave their time and provided us with their honest views. To facilitate that, none of their comments are directly attributed but as a body of work have created a rounded view of a senior recruitment process and what high level advice is most appropriate. They told us what they had seen work well and what could have been improved, both from the perspective of the hiring organisation and as a candidate. This booklet is designed 'back to back' to accommodate these two perspectives.

### Why do we need this guide?

The complex environment in which local government operates requires leadership of the highest calibre. Although perhaps self-evident, many studies over the years have demonstrated that good leadership is a fundamental ingredient to the successful functioning of any large, complex organisation. Making good, and more specifically the right, hiring decisions is therefore a critically important task. Indeed, hiring a new Chief Executive and establishing an effective working arrangement is arguably one of the most significant decisions elected members might make during their term in office.

### What sort of guide is it?

On one level recruitment is a simple process; easy to describe as a number of sequential key steps. In reality, it involves senior people and is always subtle, nuanced and complex. It is also different each time you do it. So this guide seeks to pick out some key themes, areas of risk or contention and provides some suggestions on how to navigate your way through them. The greatest value in this document is not the content but the debate and thoughts provoked.

This is not intended to be a definitive step-by-step set of activities, or a list of things you must (or must not) do. It is not, for example, explicitly recommending specific selection exercises or particular psychometric tests. Nor does it offer advice on what a good advert looks like, or whether or not to include the salary on it. Many of these decisions depend on the specific context, and every context is different. A timetabled recruitment process gives everyone involved a degree of certainty; but let us not forget that it is a process that involves people's career hopes and aspiration... and sometimes livelihoods. So getting it right is important.

### A two-way undertaking

Never forget recruitment is a two-way undertaking. Candidates are seeking to impress potential employers whilst finding out as much as they can about their prospective new organisation. Employers are, mostly, seeking to impress candidates whilst finding out as much as they can about their prospective new employees. 'Mostly', because not all organisations appear to have grasped this point. When management consultants McKinsey first coined the phrase 'the war for talent' in a report in 1997, it probably would not have resonated with most involved in local government. It is very relevant to every senior appointment today. Many of our contributors told us that finding the right talent to fill top jobs had become increasingly more difficult in recent times. So how much effort is your organisation putting in to attracting and developing the very best people it can? This cannot start and end with a recruitment process. It should be an integral part of your overall talent management strategy.

### Caveat Emptor

For both hiring organisations and prospective candidates, it is worth remembering 'buyer beware.' Both parties have to live with the consequences of their decisions and there are often pressures on both propelling them towards an appointment...which may not be the right decision.

### The local authority setting

Senior recruitment in a local authority setting is different to hiring senior colleagues in other parts of the economy. The role of democratically elected members is fundamental. So, whilst this guide refers to a 'hiring manager', which is often a Chief Executive when hiring a Director, it recognises that the ultimate decision-making responsibility usually lies with a panel of elected members or a Directly Elected Mayor. Different scenarios and local constitutions require different approaches. For example, there are some obvious differences in the starting points when hiring a Chief Executive or hiring a Director. In the case of a Director, the Chief Executive usually plays the role of the hiring manager and principal advisor to the elected members making the decision. When hiring a Chief Executive, elected members may turn to a range of sources for advice, guidance and practical help. Hiring a new Director into an existing, well-established team is different to a new organisation hiring its very first team of Directors. This guide seeks to acknowledge these differences but for the sake of brevity and accessibility, it is not drawn into every detailed distinction.

### The key protagonists

At a minimum, there are two obvious key protagonists in a recruitment exercise: those representing the hiring organisation (elected members and officers) and candidates looking to be hired. In senior recruitment there is often a third: the executive recruitment consultant. An experienced consultant can provide valuable advice and guidance to the hiring organisation throughout the recruitment process as well as connecting with some of the most capable candidates who might not otherwise consider applying. The decision about *whether* to use a recruitment consultant is an important one, but *who* to engage and *how* to work with them also needs careful thought.

*"We look for visionaries with dirty fingernails."*

*- County Council CEO*



## KEY MESSAGES

### These are big decisions

Not only will a new Chief Executive or Director help shape the future path of your organisation, they are also significant financial investments. Assuming a five year tenure and taking into account direct costs (e.g. salary) and indirect costs (e.g. support staff), these can be multi-million pound decisions.

### Context is everything

Despite potential similarities, it is self-evident that each recruitment exercise will be different, perhaps more so now than in the past. Chief Officer posts are very different in different places and at different times – avoid the trap of thinking otherwise. However urgent, your organisation needs to design a recruitment process that reflects your requirements and the specific context.

### Defining requirements

If you are the hiring organisation, working out precisely what you need – and therefore what you are looking for – is no easy task. But it is one that should be undertaken before you launch a recruitment process. What you had before might not be what you need in the future, and it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking solely about what you liked (or didn't like) about the previous incumbent. It's entirely possible that there will be a degree of iteration and refinement as you move through the process, but clear agreement on why you are recruiting, the principal objectives of the job, and the sort of person you are seeking is critical before you start. A good recruitment consultant will ask the right questions to ensure these considerations are aired as a first step.

### Honesty is fundamental

Honesty from all parties involved is an important value to hold on to throughout the process. Honesty from the hiring organisation about what they are really looking for and the challenges they are facing; honesty from the candidates about whether they think they would be the right fit for the role on offer. The same applies to third party advisors, such as recruitment consultants, where the accuracy and integrity of feedback and suitability is paramount.

### Relationships are critical

Effective organisational leadership is built on relationships of trust and confidence. The recruitment process has to find ways to test whether trust and confidence is likely to exist between the candidates and the hiring manager and elected members and a wider set of stakeholders, internal and external.

### Not appointing can sometimes be the best decision

The pressure to appoint can be considerable once the process is underway, but the consequences of appointing the wrong person (or, for a candidate, joining the wrong organisation) can be very significant. Remember there is *always* an option not to appoint (or to stop your involvement in a process), which requires honesty and a degree of bravery.

### Don't underestimate the time investment

All involved will have competing pressures and priorities which could crowd out the time spent on thinking about and participating in a recruitment process. Good decisions require an investment of considerable time and attention. But remember, there is a balance to strike: a process that is too demanding on candidates risks putting off the best talent.

### The importance of 'fit'

Perhaps the most subjective and crucial aspect of the recruitment process. Organisational 'fit' can be viewed through different lenses, from the degree of personal chemistry between individuals to the match between candidates' capabilities and the requirements in respect of the organisation's future purposes and challenges. Experience, skills and knowledge are clearly important, but it is often the values and behaviours of leaders that are key factors in the level of success they achieve for their organisation and its wider stakeholders. Understanding the attributes you are seeking (and why), and finding ways to assess and triangulate them is fundamental.

### The role of the current postholder

The role of the outgoing postholder through the process should be considered carefully. They can be valuable sources of information and advice, but too much involvement (especially involving them in formal interviews) will be counter-productive. This is about the future not the past, however good that has been. Hiring organisations should avoid the temptation to be overly influenced by the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the previous incumbent.

### Confidentiality

A very important consideration for the majority of senior people currently in another permanent role. Knowing that a senior colleague is applying for other jobs can have a destabilising effect on teams and the organisation, and undermine relationships with members. All those involved have a duty of care to ensure that confidentiality is respected, and knowledge limited to those closely involved. Not doing so will deter the best candidates from applying or withdraw from progressing applications. It is the first test of trust between councils and their prospective future leaders.

### Ensure those making the decisions are fully supported

We can't all be experts in recruitment, selection or assessment... but we can ensure those responsible for making critical decisions are given appropriate support, advice and training to help them make the best decisions possible. When was the last time your organisation provided decision makers with training on how to discharge their responsibilities in best practice recruitment and selection processes?

### It's not all about the final panel interview

A good recruitment process seeks to gather evidence from a number of sources to help organisations judge the capabilities and potential fit of the candidates, whilst giving candidates a number of opportunities to understand whether this is the right job for them. The final panel interview is usually the culmination of that process and a chance to draw all the evidence together and consider it in the round. You need to think carefully about who you ask to be involved, what information you give them, how you collect their views and feed back your choices to them.

### Recruitment doesn't stop once a job offer has been accepted

All parties involved have a responsibility to ensure the smooth transition into a new role, place or organisation. But this is not just about the logistics of moving house or ensuring a lap top or security pass is ready on day one. It's about reflecting on what has been learnt during the process to help enable the new hire to perform to the best of their ability in the role and maximise their positive impact in their new organisation.



# ORGANISATIONS START HERE



*"Don't plan for  
a brighter yesterday."  
- London Borough CEO*

## WHY RECRUIT...AND WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

The opportunity presented by someone moving on is a chance to pause, reflect and ask some fundamental questions. What are we trying to achieve over the next few years and how does this role help us achieve that? Do we need to hire to this post in its current form...or indeed at all?

Hiring a senior officer is a substantial financial and organisational commitment and time should be taken to consider the options carefully and to avoid temptation to rush straight into a recruitment process.

If the decision is to hire, then you should consider:

- **The principal focus of the job.** For example, are you looking for a Chief Executive who will focus the majority of their time fixing some fundamental organisational issues, or is there a requirement for them to spend proportionally more of their time working externally with partners and stakeholders? Do you want a new Director to inject a renewed sense of urgency and pace into the execution of existing strategies, or do you need someone to better align that service area to a new direction?
- **Who is providing advice and support to elected members?** For a Director appointment, that is likely to be the Chief Executive and the Human Resources Director. For a CEO appointment, there are other, independent, sources that could be considered: Solace, the LGA, regional bodies, trusted former or current Chief Executives or HR Directors, elected members from other authorities and experienced recruitment consultants may all have a role to play and offer different and valuable perspectives.
- **What you know about the existing team,** and to what extent you want this new hire to change the current team mix of skills, experience, knowledge and behaviours.

- **What has been learnt since the role was last recruited to?**
- **The factors that could influence the timing of the recruitment process.** For example, concluding a Chief Executive process before an upcoming Election when political control could change may not be wise.
- **Whether interim (an external person coming in) or acting up (a current employee moving into the role) arrangements should be put in place.** If they are, bear in mind the message you might be sending to external candidates if the acting Director or CEO is clearly a contender for the permanent role.
- **Whether there are any strong internal candidates** or those who can be developed or moved from elsewhere in the organisation. Is the organisation best served by considering the widest possible field or by running an internal process first?
- **The thoughts and perspective of key stakeholders** including the outgoing post holder.
- **What success looks like** in the role and the short, medium and longer term outcomes you want the new hire to achieve.
- **The skills, experience and behaviour you will need** for the present and the future, and not for the past. For example, how important are digital skills and behaviours to you?

It might well be the case that despite your very best efforts, the answers to some of these difficult questions are elusive or inconclusive. Keep going – the answers may become more apparent as the process progresses and your thinking is refined. However, do ensure that if things change, key protagonists are informed as early as possible and not kept in the dark.



## KEEPING AN OPEN MIND

In an environment where it is becoming increasingly difficult to find the right talent for many senior roles, keeping an open mind about where it might come from is of growing importance.

We know that empirical research<sup>1</sup> is demonstrating that diverse teams make better quality decisions, and we are conscious of the extent to which leadership teams are representative of the communities we serve.

We should be broad in our thinking when it comes to the source of new talent, as well as considering any barriers that might put people off.

*“We should think more about hiring for the future we want to create, not about hiring for the state we are currently in.”*

- Unitary CEO

- **Find out what the market is like for the sort of role you are hiring into.** Will you be able to find the skills you are looking for at the remuneration package you are prepared to pay? Are you configuring the role so that it will be attractive? Talk to others who have been recruiting for similar roles recently to get a view.
- **Think about the way you put your recruitment material together** and the language that you use. Might it put different groups of people off?
- **Consider whether it is absolutely necessary** for the successful candidate to have a background in local government.
- **Ask yourself to what extent does this person need to be a subject matter expert.** Some of the best leaders in local government today do not have a professional background in the areas they are leading, and of course Chief Executives come from a variety of different professional backgrounds.
- **That said, remember that organisational context is highly relevant.** The pressing leadership requirements of a failing service in a challenging partnership environment may be different to a high-performing one.
- **Think about the balance of potential versus current capability.** Most people move jobs for some element of ‘stretch’. Just because someone has done a similar job in a neighbouring authority does not necessarily mean that they are the right candidate for your council at this time.
- **To what extent can we think beyond our traditional norms** and create an environment that allows for different working patterns? For example, can we offer potential job sharing arrangements or technology solutions that facilitate remote working for those with caring responsibilities? Might a time-limited fixed-term contract achieve your aims and objectives and be more attractive to some than a permanent one?
- **Think about the support you can offer** to those from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds once they have joined your organisation.
- **Ask yourself whether you would expect your appointee to relocate** to the city, town, borough or county? To what extent does their location of residence impact on their ability to do the job?
- **We all bring our own prejudices and biases** to a recruitment process, often rooted in our own experience. Acknowledging that is a good start, but you may need to do some specific work with your decision-making colleagues to understand and work with the group’s conscious and unconscious biases.

1. Including McKinsey, *Why Diversity Matters* (2015) and *Delivering Through Diversity* (2018)



## THE COURTSHIP

Recruitment is a two-way process. In crude terms, both the organisation and the candidates are to some extent 'buying' and 'selling', with the emphasis on each changing as the process unfolds. During this early phase the organisation is definitely trying to 'sell' itself and it is important to think through the key messages you want to give and how to convey them.

In essence, what is your compelling narrative? You've thought hard about what you need and the requirements you are seeking in a new hire. But why should people want to come and work at your organisation and do this job?

Competition for the best talent can be fierce – don't assume that people will simply apply without the organisation putting in some effort.



- **Honesty is important.** Whilst you will want to portray both the organisation and the role positively, there are both moral and practical considerations if you stray from reality into the realms of the misleading.
- **This might be an opportunity to refresh and refashion your council's 'brand' and external reputation.** Don't forget that your wider workforce and members will be reading the campaign materials, so it is important that messaging is consistent with the organisation's objectives, values and expectations.
- **Whilst you must carefully consider the key experiences, skills and knowledge that will be required, don't over-specify.** Is a person description with more than ten 'essential' criteria really necessary?
- **Think about how you are communicating your key messages,** the collateral you use and, importantly, ensure you are consistent across all channels, whether that be an advert, a job description, website or written candidate brief.
- **Remember that candidates will be thinking about the people that they will be working with** as much as the organisation and place. So it's worth thinking about the amount of time and effort the hiring manager and/or elected members put into this phase of the recruitment process and the extent to which they are available to speak to potential candidates.
- **If you are the outgoing postholder, it's possible, likely even, that potential candidates will want to ask you about the role.** This is a perfectly legitimate request and one you should consider giving time to.
- **Be prepared to provide as much clarity as you can about your 'offer'.** Salary is clearly an important factor that candidates will be considering, but relocation assistance could be important for some, pension arrangements should not be forgotten – and, for CEO roles, candidates may ask about Returning Officer fees.

## STAKEHOLDER VIEWS

No local authority acts in isolation, and each works closely with a range of different stakeholders and partners.

Your new Chief Executive or Director will need to build successful working relationships with a wide range of people, so it makes sense to involve some of them in helping you make sound selection decisions.

Not only can they help you triangulate your own judgements, the process also gives you the chance to buy them into the future you plan to build in your council and your locality.

*"It's important that we listen to the views of our partners. We might not always like what they are telling us, but they often bring a valuable perspective."*

*- London Borough Leader*

- **Think about when to seek the views of stakeholders.** Many will do so towards the end of a process, but some stakeholders can offer a valuable external perspective at the very start and help shape your thinking.
- **Consider those you want to be involved and why.** Engage the right people whose opinions you value and not just any representative from an organisation who happens to be available on any given day. Think about their credibility in the eyes of the candidates and how they will represent your place.
- **The context will guide your thinking on the range of stakeholders to involve.** For example, the views of children and young people or Headteachers might be of interest when hiring a new Director of Children's Services. The Chair of a Local Enterprise Partnership might offer a valuable perspective when recruiting for a Director of Place.
- **A diagonal cross-section of staff** can provide valuable feedback, as can service users from a range of settings.
- **It's important to consider how this is done, and remember that it is part of a two-way process.** Rather than set the meetings up as a series of interviews, many authorities see value in understanding how the candidates might guide and shape a discussion.
- **Whilst it is a given that elected members will make the final hiring decision,** there is little point in seeking the views of partners and stakeholders if they are not going to be listened to, or in some way taken into account, by the appointments panel.



## SELECTION

Throughout the period of formal selection, whether you are debating the merits of a covering letter or interpreting the data from psychometric reports, there are a number of important considerations.

Primary amongst them is being clear on what you are seeking to measure and assess, and how to do so. The work you have done to get to this point should have clarified and codified the skills, experience and knowledge you feel is particularly relevant as well as the behaviours, attitudes and values that, taken together, constitute a good 'fit'.

A common trap to fall into at this stage is to simply compare the shortlisted candidates against each other, rather than trying to appraise them against the ideal standard you have invested time in determining.

And remember, you do not have to appoint; it may be costly and awkward to make this choice, but it can sometimes be the best decision.

*"An ideal assessment process is one which allows candidates to show their brilliance."*

*- District CEO*

- **Ensure you have got the right people on the appointments panel**, not only in terms of political representation and diversity of experience and background but thinking about who is likely to work most closely with the new hire. Whilst the nature of democracy means political leadership changes (in some places more frequently than others and sometimes unexpectedly) it makes little sense, for example, for an outgoing Leader to play a central role in appointing a new Chief Executive.
- **It is unreasonable to expect every panel member will be familiar with senior selection**. So it is worth considering what training might be required to ensure those involved are equipped with the knowledge and skills to make good hiring decisions.
- **Take advice on the latest best practice in leadership assessment**. Whilst structured, good interviews are very valuable selection tools, research over a number of years<sup>2</sup> has demonstrated that an interview on its own is, at best, a modestly successful predictor of future success in a role. It follows that candidates should be assessed in different ways and appraised from different angles. Well-run assessment processes can include a range of different approaches from psychometric tools and role plays to written exercises, observed exercises and presentations.
- **Many authorities utilise the expertise of someone** who is currently doing (or has previously done) a similar job elsewhere. Commonly known as 'Technical Assessors', their perspective can be valuable; particularly in determining whether candidates have the requisite skills, knowledge and experience. It is worth satisfying yourself that the proposed Technical Assessor has the track record to ensure their independence, the validity of their advice and their likely credibility with the shortlisted candidates. You may identify a suitable person from your own network – you don't have to rely on others to provide one.
- **Selection processes should be demanding, but not to the extent that they place unreasonable demands on candidates**. Consider how much time you are expecting them to spend being assessed and familiarising themselves with your locality and organisation. You want to devise a process that allows candidates to feel they have been able to give their best.
- **Selection processes can have a number of moving parts and many participants**. Ensure sufficient time and effort is invested in delivering a well-orchestrated process that leaves candidates, partners and stakeholders feeling impressed and valued.
- **Assessing organisational fit is best achieved through a range of different selection methods** and requires appropriate time investment. That usually means the Chief Executive and/or relevant elected members spending quality 'face to face' time with short listed candidates.
- **The importance of personal relationships should not be underestimated**. Trying to work out whether you will be able to develop a strong working relationship (not to be confused with 'personal chemistry' or friendship) takes some time to establish.
- **It might be tempting to seek the views of an experienced and well-regarded outgoing postholder** by including them in the formal selection process. This should be carefully considered and usually avoided. By definition, they cannot give an independent view and even the most self-aware might unwittingly seek to protect their legacy. Asking the outgoing postholder to attend formal interviews is rarely a good idea and can place both them and candidates in a difficult position.
- **Most organisations have spent time developing and articulating a set of organisational values**. Some have gone further and developed a set of leadership behaviours. Done well, this can be an incredibly helpful frame of reference within which to make good selection decisions.

*"Too often we ask inexperienced selection panel members to make fundamentally important hiring decisions without giving them the support they deserve or require."*

*- London Borough CEO*

2. Including Robertson, I. & Smith M. (2001). *Personnel Selection*, Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 74



## DUE DILIGENCE

Hiring senior officers should be done in an open, honest and transparent fashion. This does not stop you carrying out your due diligence on candidates away from the formal selection activities, but you must proceed with care.

There is no doubt that candidates can improve their interview or presentation performance with practice. So, whilst a good formal selection process is designed to look at candidates from different angles, due diligence can help you triangulate your judgements and mitigate the risk of hiring the wrong person.

*“Creating the right team around you is one of the fundamental tasks of leadership so why wouldn’t you put a lot of time and energy into it?”*

*- County Council CEO*

- **An obvious and traditional method is to seek written references from current and/or former employers.** There is no requirement in law for an organisation to give an employee reference to another: given the potential for contention and indeed litigation, many employers in the private sector no longer offer references beyond statements of fact such as title and time spent with the company.
- **Local government has maintained the tradition of seeking and giving references.** They should be treated with a degree of caution but can offer useful perspectives. Most councils seek them prior to the final interviews, although many councils do not consider them until after candidates have been interviewed.
- **Given the highly connected nature of local government, it is entirely possible that you will know people who have worked with some or all of the candidates you are assessing.** Is it right, or fair, to pick up the phone? It is a contentious issue, but whether you do or don’t, have respect for the confidentiality of the process. You have a duty of care to the candidate in this delicate situation.
- **We live in the digital age** – there is a lot of publicly available information of varying evidence and weight. A good recruitment process will always check and assess candidates’ digital ‘footprint’.
- **Throughout the process you may be offered advice and information from a range of sources** about the suitability and quality of particular candidates. Tread with caution and seek to separate hearsay from truth and fact from fiction. Perception versus fact needs to be weighted accordingly. Perspectives from trusted sources can be valuable but are not a substitute for a comprehensive assessment of candidates by professionals trained to offer their independent and, as far as it is ever possible, objective advice.

## TRANSITION

Concluding a successful recruitment process should leave everyone feeling very positive – and possibly quite tired... But don’t lose momentum! The induction process starts immediately.

- **Consider what you have learnt about your new senior hire** during the recruitment process and how that might inform your approach to helping them start in the new organisation in the best possible way.
- **Most organisations will have a range of induction programmes**, with content tailored to different roles and departments. Remember though, your new senior hire will also have requirements beyond the usual logistical ones of security passes.
- **Just because they are senior, don’t assume your new colleague is experienced in putting together their own transition programme.** They are likely to be facing an almost overwhelming workload in the months immediately before and after joining a new organisation. It’s likely, but not necessarily certain, that first-time Directors or Chief Executives will need proportionately more support...although some might not necessarily realise or want to admit to it.
- **Ensure you give considered, authentic feedback to all those candidates who ask for it.** It’s entirely possible that the successful candidate may not ask given the number of different plates they are likely to be spinning. It would be well worth making the offer, and will build your reputation as a good employer.
- **Consider what particular support you need to put in place for someone coming from a non-traditional background**, perhaps from beyond the world of local government.
- **Your new hire should be talking to you from the very start** about how the organisation invests in leadership development. Don’t underestimate the value of good coaching and mentoring for senior leaders, particularly in times of career transition.
- **If you are hiring a new team (or part of) what work do you need to do to foster the conditions for successful team working?**
- **The question of a ‘handover’ can be a delicate subject and will depend on the context.** It might, for a variety of reasons, not be an option. If it is, and if both the outgoing postholder and incoming postholder are keen, then the general consensus of our reference group is that it should be a relatively short affair. Teams will very quickly start looking to the future and not to the past. Giving the new hire sufficient space to start in the new organisation in a way that suits them best is an important consideration. Fundamentally, any handover should be for the benefit of the new postholder. If they do not feel it is necessary, do not force the issue.





# FINDING YOUR PERFECT FIT

A candidate's guide to senior recruitment



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# INDIVIDUALS START HERE



*"For too long we had valued skills and experience above attributes, behaviours and potential. We have now changed that balance and are making better recruitment decisions as a result."*

*- City Council CEO*



## WHAT AM I LOOKING FOR?

Before applying for a job, you need to ask yourself some fundamental questions and be honest in your answers. Those that know themselves well will often be best placed throughout a recruitment process.

- **Ambition can be a very positive force**, but it's not good enough to want to be a Chief Executive just because it's the top job in an organisation, or to become a Director because it represents the pinnacle of your chosen profession. You need to think deeply about your motivation.
- **You need to understand whether you have enough of the requisite skills, knowledge and experience** for the type of role you have in mind. Friends, colleagues, mentors and coaches can all help you make this judgement, but you need to be honest in your own assessment.
- **You also need to consider your leadership style and behaviours** and the sort of context and organisation they can best be deployed in. If you are someone who has thrived in a crisis or who has led a turnaround programme, are you best placed to join an organisation where the elected members are convinced that they require incremental progress?
- **Do not underestimate the specific requirements and assets of a place or locality.** Whilst many of the issues may be similar, every place has defining and unique features, culture, people and communities. Ask yourself why you want to work in that particular place.
- **It's worth keeping abreast of the roles being advertised in the media** and seeking to understand what is being sought. Current market knowledge will help you to frame your thinking and job applications.

## KEEPING AN OPEN MIND

Even the most seemingly obvious jobs in the most obvious of places might not be the right ones to go for. As local authorities are changing shape and size, so are the senior jobs being created within them. Traditional career paths and orthodox routes to advancement are not what they once were.

- **Reflect on what you are really looking for** when you first embarked on your job search and calibrate that as objectively as you can against the opportunity as presented.
- **The time between an advert appearing and the closing date can be as little as two weeks.** It's important that you start your due diligence as early as you can.
- **Despite best efforts, the competence of some organisations to put together a well-run recruitment campaign might not be as good as you might expect.** Sometimes a bad process can hide a very good job.
- **If you have been unsuccessful, seek feedback.** Good organisations, both councils and recruitment firms, should be skilled in giving you honest and constructive feedback. An enquiry which is clearly made in a spirit of a genuine desire to learn is more likely to yield richer information than one which is perceived as overtly challenging.



## THE COURTSHIP

You have seen the advert, read the material and perhaps watched a short video. Now you want to know more.

- **Consider those you know who can tell you about the place, the people and the organisation.** What is the leader / CEO / Director that you might be working for like?
- **Think about who can connect you to partners and stakeholders** who may be willing to offer a view.
- **If recruitment consultants are being used, they should be an early port of call.** The first and most obvious question is “what are they really looking for?” Remember that the consultants could be trying to squeeze a lot of conversations with potential candidates into a relatively short period of time. They have a vested interest in trying to establish early on whether you are a likely contender, so make it as easy as possible for them: Explain briefly what you do, where you have done it and why you think you might be a suitable candidate. Having a conversation in the spirit of “let’s not waste each other’s time” will serve you well.
- **Make the time to visit the place before you apply.** If you can’t find the time, does that tell you something about your level of interest?
- **Establishing whether the CEO or Leader is willing to have a conversation with you might tell you something about them and their approach** as well as your perceived suitability. Again, recruitment consultants can help here as they are in a position to broker potential conversations. Their mission is to find and introduce the very best candidates they can, not to fill up a CEO’s diary with anyone who wants to have a conversation with them.
- **If you know them (or even if you don’t) why wouldn’t you consider speaking to the outgoing post holder?** They can always say no, but more likely than not they will be willing to give some time to help you.

## STAKEHOLDER VIEWS

It is likely that you will meet a range of stakeholders during the final stages of the selection process, although you may have already reached out to some as part of your due diligence.

- **Different places and organisations will run these sessions in different ways.** Sometimes they can be highly structured and feel like a formal interview, but don’t be surprised if you are required to make the running. It’s important you understand the context before you step into the room and what is required of you.
- **Remember that this is a two-way process.** Whilst the stakeholders will be asked to give their views – most likely directly to the appointments panel – this is an opportunity for you to understand how the organisation is perceived from the outside, and sometimes the inside too.

## SELECTION

Metaphors such as jumping over hurdles or through hoops are often used to describe a selection process. They can be long, testing and arduous. Indeed, entering more than one whilst working full time can present considerable challenges. Technically, it starts when you submit your application. It is, obviously, a competitive process and not only are you competing against the ideal standard set by the organisation, you are in direct competition with others. It is entirely possible that you will both know (and meet) some of your direct ‘competitors’ if you get to the final selection phases.

- **Whilst the selection process is primarily designed by the hiring organisation to help them discriminate between candidates and make suitability judgements, it is also an opportunity for you to see the organisation at close quarters – which should not be wasted.**
- **Determining when to ‘break cover’ and let your current employer know that you are applying for a role is a judgement call** that will, in part, be informed by context and relationships. However, most councils will expect that you will have done so prior to attending the final interview. If this is not possible then you should be clear with the hiring organisation and/or their advisors about the circumstances.
- **Getting honest feedback (from recruitment consultants if they are involved) at every stage of the process is vital.** You need to equip yourself with the insight to help you navigate through the selection process and how you maximise your perceived strengths and mitigate your perceived weaknesses.
- **Whilst you shouldn’t let a bad process get in the way of a great job, be alert to the warning signs** that might tell you that this is not the job or the organisation for you. Once in a competition, our competitive instincts often kick in and we want to win! But at what cost? ‘Winning’ and accepting a job that is not right for you can have serious consequences.

## DUE DILIGENCE

You have already asked yourself why you want to apply for a role in a particular place and have prepared yourself to do well in a selection competition. Throughout the process, you need to do all you can to determine whether this is the right job for you. In many respects it is an iterative process, and each step along the path you can critically evaluate the evidence either presented to you or that you uncover.

- **Preliminary interviews are a useful place to find out more.** The line of questioning will tell you something and you should be given an opportunity to ask some questions. Think carefully however about the questions you want to ask; those running the interviews will be on a timeline and will not appreciate you bringing out a long list. And don’t make the mistake of attending the preliminary interviews simply as a fact-finding mission. The interviewers will have expected you to have thought carefully about the role and the place and are likely to ask for your early view.
- **The recruitment competition is just that; and, once entered, most don’t continue merely to come second.** Many have a competitive spirit. But don’t let your competitive spirit override any warning signals you might perceive. At each step, carefully calibrate what you are seeing and hearing against your ideal standard of a job. None are perfect of course, but do heed any warning signs that tell you this is becoming a job too far from the one you want.
- **Remember, in the same way that an organisation may decide their best option is not to appoint to a role, you may decide that this is not the job for you.** Pulling out of a process may be awkward and carry some reputational risk, but those risks can be managed. Honesty and integrity are key watch-words.



## TRANSITION

Face the reality that your new job starts from the moment you accept it. The transition from one job to another can be a very busy and stressful time as you seek to end one job well whilst successfully starting another. The biggest challenge you are likely to face is staying focused on the right things, when there will be so many demands on your time. Building a support network around you at this time will help.

- **Start thinking straight away about creating a framework for your transition.** Consider who can help you and what you need to know and do. Build on the plan you were considering while thinking yourself into the role throughout the recruitment process.
- **You have the primary responsibility for your own learning and leadership journey.** Ask yourself what investment you might need to make at this point.
- **If you don't already have a coach, consider hiring one for the next six months.** Someone who can support and challenge you as you constantly re-prioritise and navigate through challenging situations can be invaluable. It's entirely reasonable to expect your new employer to pay for this as part of your ongoing leadership development.
- **Consider who in your network could act or put you in touch with a mentor** – someone who has done, or is doing, the job you are about to do and doing it well.
- **How are you going to craft your first few weeks?** Who are the people inside and outside the new organisation who can help you do that?
- **Ask for feedback on the recruitment process.** Consider what that insight is telling you about your leadership style. Is there anything you need to change? Are there particular people who you need to build early relationships with?

