



**Civil Service
Commissioners**
for Northern Ireland

AUDITING FOR IMPROVEMENT:

AUDIT FRAMEWORK AND GUIDANCE

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context

The Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland are appointed under the Northern Ireland Constitutional Act 1973. The Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 requires them to ensure that appointment to posts in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) are made on merit, on the basis of fair and open competition, known as the Merit Principle. Commissioners contribute to the development of an effective and impartial Civil Service and play an important role in safeguarding the non-partisanship of the Civil Service, seeking to ensure that recruitment decisions are free from political influence.

Commissioners discharge their statutory responsibilities by:

- maintaining the principle of selection on merit on the basis of fair and open competition in relation to selection for appointment;
- making General Regulations which prescribe the circumstances in which the Merit Principle shall not apply;
- publishing and maintaining a Recruitment Code on the interpretation and application of the Merit Principle;
- auditing recruitment policies and practices followed in making appointments to the Civil Service to establish whether the Recruitment Code is being observed; and
- requiring the publication of information relating to recruitment and the use of permitted exceptions to the Merit Principle.

Under Article 4(4) of the 1999 Order, Commissioners have a clear duty to conduct independent audits to provide assurances of the integrity of the appointment process. Commissioners recognise the central role and importance of the audit function in providing objective information, advice and assurance to the people of Northern Ireland, on the integrity of the appointments process, including merit and non-partisanship. Audit is, therefore, one of the Commissioners' key regulatory functions and a critical element of the range of inter-related oversight tools they employ as set out at Figure 1 overleaf.

References to Commissioners' statutory audit function through-out this document encompass audit and review.

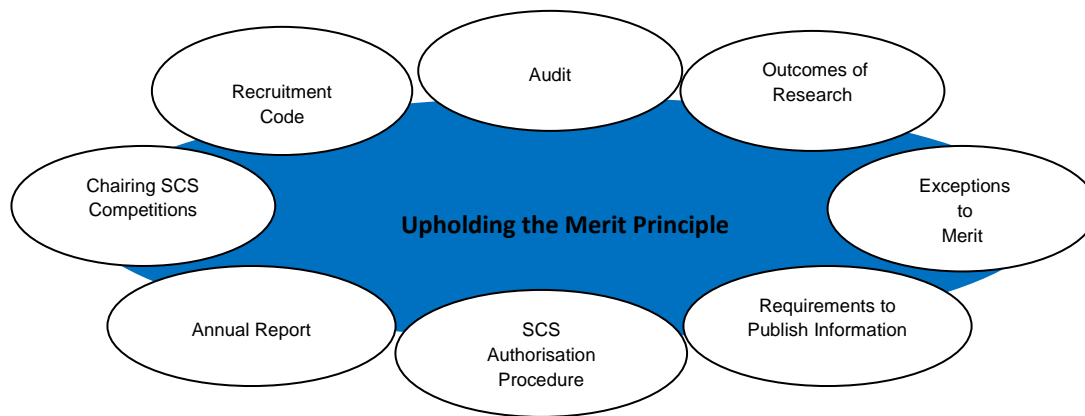


Figure 1: Range of oversight tools

The Commissioners' Recruitment Code sets out four key principles which must be upheld in all aspects of recruitment and selection for appointment to the NICS. The purpose of the audit function is to examine the recruitment policies and practices followed in making appointments to the NICS and to obtain evidence as to whether or not these principles have been upheld, both in spirit and in practice.

The four principles embodied in the Recruitment Code are:

- appointments should be made on merit;
- appointment processes should be fit for purpose;
- appointment processes should be fair and applied with consistency; and
- appointments should be made in an open, accountable and transparent manner.

To support the ability to produce robust, evidence-based and reliable audit findings and recommendations, this Guidance and the Audit Framework (**Appendix A**) set out the standards and related advice which govern the conduct of audit reviews.

Since 2015/16 Commissioners' approach to audit and review has been further developed to seek assurances on, and influence improvements to, NICS recruitment policies and practices through regular structured engagement with NICS HR.

1.2 Principles of good regulation

Commissioners believe in a system of firm but fair regulation and have adopted the Principles of Regulatory Reform which have been endorsed by the Northern Ireland Executive¹. These key principles, which underpin the Commissioners' approach to audit, are reflected below:

Proportionality

Commissioners will endeavour to ensure that audits will be carried out in proportion to the risks or issues identified, the seriousness of any breach of the Code and the actions required by the NICS to make improvements.

Consistency

Commissioners will endeavour to ensure that they, and those who work on their behalf, take a consistent approach to the regulation and audit of recruitment and selection practices and procedures. Consistency, however, does not mean uniformity. Commissioners need to take account of the many variables; for instance, the impact of non-compliance; the degree of risk; the nature of the management response; and previous audit findings / recommendations.

Targeting

Commissioners will endeavour to ensure that their limited resources are used appropriately on audit topics which will generally be informed by risk and practices and procedures which may impact on the Merit Principle.

Transparency

Commissioners will endeavour to ensure that audit reports will be based on clear, current and reliable evidence. Commissioners will provide objective information to the NICS about improvements required and the rationale and evidence supporting audit findings and recommendations.

Accountability

Commissioners will be accountable for the conduct and actions of audit teams in the discharge of their statutory audit function. They will endeavour to provide opportunities for mutual learning and the promotion of sustained improvements.

Collaboration

Annual audit plans will take into account any issues raised through engagement with NICS HR and terms of reference for audits will be agreed with the NICS before they commence. The NICS will have the opportunity to fact-check findings and to respond to recommendations before action plans are drawn up.

¹ [Better Regulation: An Action Plan for Reform, March 2016](#)

Support

Commissioners' approach to audit and review will be one which supports the NICS to meet the requirements of their Recruitment Code through an emphasis on improvements.

Regard for Economic Growth

Commissioners' audit and review plans will seek to balance the need to ensure recruitment and selection policy and practice meets the requirements of the Recruitment Code with the impact of audit and review activity on the NICS' day-to-day activities.

1.3 Use of the Guidance

The Audit Guidance sets out the framework, approach, arrangements and advice which guide the conduct of audit reviews.

The purpose of the Guidance is to:

- facilitate the conduct of high quality audits with resulting assurances;
- provide information and advice to those involved in audit;
- promote a high level of audit competence;
- provide a basis for the evaluation of the effectiveness of the audit;
- promote self-assessment and self-improvement in recruitment and selection;
and
- enable stakeholders and other interested parties to gain a better understanding of the audit process and standards of conduct.

The Guidance describes the range of audit methodology which Commissioners and others may employ and explains, in broad terms, how audits are selected, planned, conducted and reported.

2. AUDIT – OVERVIEW AND APPROACH

2.1 Audit mandate

The Commissioners' audit mandate covers all NICS recruitment activity and audits may examine any part of recruitment and selection policies, processes and procedures. NICSHR provides a centralised resourcing function for the NICS and therefore will be the main point of contact. Audits may focus on a specific recruitment competition, whether scale campaigns or to fill an individual departmental-specific vacancy. By means of the Audit Framework (**Appendix A**), Commissioners have identified quality standards and indicators which illustrate what they need to know about NICS performance in relation to each provision of the Code and to what extent the requirements of the Recruitment Code are being observed. This list is intended to guide audit and review work, but it is not however exhaustive. The specific aims and objectives for each audit review will be set out in advance.

2.2 Definition of audits

Audits are objective and systematic evaluations of activities which provide independent assessments of the performance and management of the activities under scrutiny. They also provide recommendations for the purpose of promoting improvement in performance and outcomes. Commissioners support the principle of proportionate regulation and, to that end, recognise that audits can and should range widely in scope and approach from comprehensive assessments and evaluations to lighter touch studies and surveys. The methodology employed will be determined by the range, nature and type of audits and may include surveys, questionnaires, discussion, reviews, checks, investigation, analysis, evaluation or any other methodology as appropriate.

2.3 Access to information

NICSHR and, if appropriate, Departments and Agencies, must co-operate with all audits undertaken by, or on behalf of, Commissioners. Any contracts or arrangements with external providers for relevant recruitment and selection services should also include reference to this requirement.

Information may be sought from NICSHR, Departments and Agencies and relevant external providers of recruitment and selection services. Any such information should be germane to the fulfilment of the Commissioners' audit responsibilities. In view of such access the audit team have a corresponding obligation in respect of confidentiality and disclosure requirements and in accordance with regulations guiding access to information.

2.4 Roles and responsibilities

Audits may be carried out by Commissioners and staff or by those engaged by Commissioners to carry out work on their behalf.

3. DISCHARGING THE AUDIT MANDATE

3.1 Strategic planning context

Identifying and selecting the areas for audit requires a comprehensive knowledge of the NICS, and of relevant recruitment and selection issues, together with sound judgement to ensure that a proportionate risk-based approach is applied and implemented.

The audit identification and selection process is influenced by four key criteria:

- i.) **RELEVANCE** of the proposed topic to the Commissioners' statutory duties, the principles and requirements of the Recruitment Code and overall strategic impact;
- ii.) **RISK** including proportionality, materiality and Governmental or public interests;
- iii.) **RESULTS FOCUS** including the importance to the achievement of Commissioners' statutory responsibilities and priorities and securing sustainable improvements in recruitment and selection; and
- iv.) **RESOURCES** including availability of expertise, complexity and scope of the proposed area, experience of the audit team and operational budgets.

3.2 Strategic Planning Process

The Commissioners have established a robust planning process to ensure that relevant matters of significant risk / impact are addressed in a timely and effective fashion.

The following sets out a brief outline of the process:

- i.) Commissioners' planning cycle begins with an horizon / environmental scan in the third quarter of every year. The scan seeks to identify and assess risks; serves as a basis for identifying audit priorities; and influences the agenda for further consultation with key stakeholders;
- ii.) Commissioners review, shortlist and prioritise audit topics against specific criteria as set out in section 3.3, below, taking into consideration the outcomes and improvements from previous audits; and
- iii.) Commissioners produce a proposed audit programme for the following financial year for agreement with NICSHR.

Audit findings and outcomes will contribute to Commissioners' assessment of the extent to which the Merit Principle has been upheld during recruitment and whether the requirements of the Recruitment Code have been met. This will be reported on in Commissioners' annual report.

3.3 Audit selection and prioritisation

One of the most challenging steps in developing the annual audit plan is the selection and prioritisation process.

This iterative process takes into consideration **criteria** such as:

- significance and importance of the issue;
- acknowledged material breach of the Recruitment Code;
- urgency due to risk;
- availability of audit resources;
- contribution to the Commissioners' priorities;
- specific request or priority identified by Permanent Secretaries Group (PSG), NICSHR, other stakeholders or Commissioners
- current political interest or public concern;
- findings from previous audits;
- requirement to follow-up particular issues; and
- issues that feature strongly in complaints and litigation.

3.4 Measuring outcomes

Commissioners will review and monitor their approach to audit, review outcomes and the improvements made in relation to the requirements of the Recruitment Code and the standards and expectations set out in the Audit Framework. The findings will be used to inform future planning and prioritisation of audits.

4. CONDUCTING AUDITS

4.1 Standards

The Audit team should:

- exercise due care and sound judgement;
- comprise individuals who are objective and independent;
- have a collective knowledge of the subject matter and have the auditing proficiency to fulfil the requirements of the audit;
- ensure proper supervision of all of its members;
- seek from managers of the area being audited their views about critical elements of the audit, where appropriate;
- identify and secure specialist advice, as required; and
- maintain good communications with all those involved, including Commissioners.

Due care and sound judgement

Due care requires the Audit teams to carry out their work diligently, conscientiously and with rigour. They must exercise sound judgement at all stages of the audit in:

- deciding the nature and extent of the audit;
- setting the audit objectives;
- identifying the relevant sections of the Audit Framework;
- defining the approach, scope and methodology; and
- reporting the issues, conclusions and recommendations.

Objectivity and Independence

The Audit Team must maintain an unbiased view when making decisions about scope, objectives, audit evidence, the significance of observations and conclusions-and will not direct the audit towards areas of personal interest or prejudice findings. The findings and report will be informed only by an evaluation of the evidence obtained.

Audit teams should be free from any hindrances to their independence or from conflicts of interest that might impair their impartiality in carrying out their work, making judgments or formulating recommendations.

Audit teams are encouraged to develop and maintain good relations with the NICS. However, in discharging their statutory responsibility for audit, team members will do so with independence and impartiality.

Competence of the Audit Team

The audit team is required to possess collectively the knowledge, disciplines, skills and experience to carry out the audit effectively. The audit team will have:

- undertaken mandatory, audit specific training;
- knowledge of good audit practice and the ability to apply that knowledge;
- experience and technical skills to deal effectively with the subject matter of the audit;
- knowledge of the Governmental environment and of the organisation(s) being audited;
- knowledge of the various statutory provisions, regulations and policies related to the subject matter of the audit; and
- procedures in place to ensure proper supervision of all its team members.

Working with the NICS management

Good relations between the audit teams and the NICS are built on the basis of mutual respect and trust.

The audit team will seek NICS input when:

- planning the audit, identifying responsibility for the activities, associated risks, management concerns and identification of other audits or studies carried out in the area;
- finalising the Terms of Reference to obtain views on the scope, the objectives, approach and methodology;
- gathering evidence and providing analysis of findings to support development of a draft report;
- preparing findings based on the information and evidence provided and checking these findings for factual accuracy;
- presenting/ communicating outcomes of the audit to NICS following endorsement and approval by Commissioners; and
- seeking a management response and action plan with completion dates.

Confidentiality and Security

Commissioners, and those working on their behalf, seek to develop and maintain a relationship of mutual respect and trust with the NICS and will recognise the value and ownership of information received in the course of the audit process. The OCSC will collect, store and use the information provided in the course of the audit process in a manner that is compatible with the Data Protection Act 2018 and in line with the OCSC Data Sharing Agreement with NICS HR. This will include compliance with the OCSC Retention and Disposal Schedule and, when required to do so, the sharing of information in line with UK information access legislation.

Commissioner Arrangements

The audit team will be supported by/ have oversight from Commissioners in the planning of the audit, to provide advice on the process and to participate in initial and final meetings with NICS management. Commissioners will:

- ensure that the audit team members understand fully the audit objective(s);
- provide appropriate advice to team members;
- ensure good communication throughout the audit process; and
- approve the audit process, the evidence to be collected and the draft report.

Commissioners' responsibilities may be discharged collectively and/or by the appointment of a lead Commissioner.

4.2 Audit Process

The Audit process comprises a cycle of planning, audit and review, reporting and follow-up as outlined in Figure 2 below:

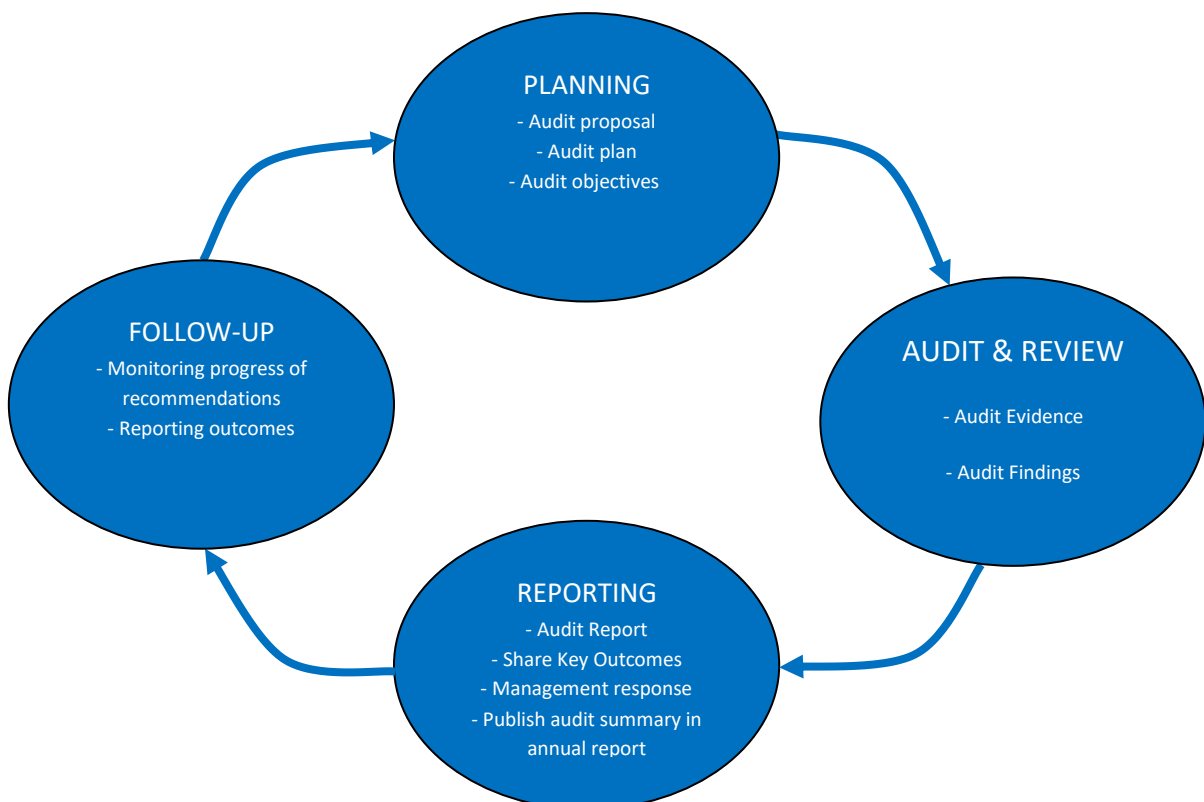


Figure 2: Audit Cycle

4.2.1 Audit Planning

As part of the audit planning process, the audit teams will ensure an appropriate level of knowledge of the area to be audited, the recruitment and selection activities under examination and the issues facing them. During the planning phase, the audit team will prepare an audit proposal, including draft Terms of Reference, for approval by the Civil Service Commissioners. This will outline the audit objectives and scope of the audit including:

- the nature and extent of the audit;
- the audit objectives;
- the required skills, disciplines and experience of the audit team if necessary; and
- the security clearance requirements for the audit.

Draft Terms of Reference for the audit will be sent to NICSHR (or to Departments and copied to NICSHR, if appropriate) for agreement.

4.2.2 Audit and Review

Evidence

The purpose of the Audit and Review phase is to gather appropriate and sufficient evidence to support the contents of the audit report. The evidence gathering process involves:

- designing the audit procedures or tests from a range of tools / techniques;
- carrying out the audit procedures or tests to gather evidence;
- analysing evidence and drawing conclusions in accordance with the Audit Framework; and
- making decisions about whether additional advice or information is required.

Audit findings, conclusions and recommendations included in the report must be able to withstand critical examination and must therefore be supported by appropriate, robust and sufficient evidence as set out in **Appendix B**.

Findings

The findings are the basis upon which conclusions are formed against each of the audit objectives. Where appropriate, audit findings will be used to confirm satisfactory performance or indicate the level, nature and significance of deviations from criteria and the cause of the problem, if determinable, including its effect on the subject matter of the audit.

The audit team will gather and evaluate evidence to support the assessment of the performance of the recruitment or selection activity in accordance with the Audit Framework criteria. The audit team ensures that any resulting conclusions are relevant, fair and well-founded and that recommendations have the potential to contribute to performance improvements.

4.2.3 Audit reporting

The purpose of the reporting phase is to communicate audit findings, conclusions and recommendations clearly, precisely, persuasively and effectively. Having completed the field audit work, the audit team prepares the draft report. The draft report will be passed to Commissioners for scrutiny and approval. When any necessary amendments have been made, Commissioners will meet to discuss and endorse the key outcomes, recommendations and findings. A letter detailing the key outcomes and recommendations will be prepared and sent to NICSHR (or to Departments and copied to NICSHR, if appropriate). Summary findings from the audits, together with key outcomes against the recommendations, will be published as part of the Commissioners' Annual Report.

The content of the Audit Report will include:

- the objectives, nature, scope and time period covered by the audit;
- a description of the recruitment related matter or activity that was audited;
- the relevant sections of the Audit Framework;
- the findings made;
- the conclusions reached regarding the audit objectives;
- the recommendations made in order to promote improvements; and
- the prioritisation of recommendations where appropriate.

4.2.4 Audit follow-up

Following receipt of the letter detailing the key outcomes and recommendations from the audit, NICS management are required to prepare a management response, outlining whether or not the recommendations have been accepted and the timescale for implementation. Where recommendations are not accepted, or partially accepted, these will be the subject of discussion between Commissioners and NICS management in an attempt to reach an agreed position.

Commissioners and the Secretariat will follow up audits to ascertain the extent to which the recommendations made within Audit Reports have been implemented.

The NICS will be asked to provide regular updates to Commissioners detailing the progress made on the implementation of Commissioners' audit recommendations. These updates will be recorded by the Secretariat on the Audit Matrix.

Recommendations will be classified as follows:

- i. Ongoing
- ii. Accepted / Closed
- iii. Not Accepted / Closed

An audit will remain open until all its recommendations have been closed.

If Commissioners are not satisfied that our recommendations have been followed we will initially raise the matter with NICSHR as part of our routine engagement and/or write to the NICS to seek an explanation. Commissioners may then wish to raise the matter with the Permanent Secretary or Agency Chief Executive concerned. Where this did not produce the required action, Commissioners may wish to raise the matter with the Head of the Civil Service and/ or Minister.

Commissioners will also consider whether any delay or failure to implement agreed audit recommendations is in contravention of the requirements set out in Commissioners' Recruitment Code and may decide to make comment in the audit opinion published in their annual report.

4.2.5 Commitment to Continuous Improvement

In discharging our statutory duty to audit, Commissioners will demonstrate commitment to learning and continuous improvement by means of challenge, review consultation and advice. They will continue to welcome and seek views from stakeholders and interested parties on all aspects of the audit process.

APPENDIX A: AUDIT FRAMEWORK

Part 1: Key Performance Questions

The audit framework is in two parts and derives from the principles and requirements of the Recruitment Code.

Part 1 sets out the key performance questions (KPQs) which define what Commissioners need to know about NICS performance in relation to each dimension of the framework.

Requirements of the Code	Principles of the Recruitment Code			
	Merit	Fit for Purpose	Fair	Open/Transparent
1. Attracting Candidates	<p>To what extent is the actual pool of candidates representative of the potential pool of eligible candidates?</p> <p>What evidence is there that in making further appointments from existing merit lists, the NICS upholds the Merit Principle and adheres to the requirements of the Code?</p>	<p>To what extent does the NICS attract the widest possible pool of candidates to meet its current and future needs?</p>	<p>To what extent are career opportunities in the NICS accessible to all sections of the community?</p> <p>To what extent do policies and practices promote diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity to enable the NICS to attract the widest pool of candidates?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that potential and actual barriers to broad appeal are identified and removed and that appropriate outreach measures are in place?</p> <p>To what extent do all means of communication with candidates promote confidence in the recruitment process and encourage applications?</p>
2. Assessment, Selection and Appointment processes	<p>To what extent do the eligible and / or shortlisted candidates reflect both the potential and actual pool of candidates?</p> <p>To what extent do assessment and selection methodologies serve and safeguard the Merit Principle?</p>	<p>To what extent are those selected for panels sufficiently diverse and expert to ensure appointment on Merit?</p> <p>To what extent do assessment and selection procedures ensure selection on the basis of merit, reflect good practice and promote public confidence in recruitment to the NICS?</p>	<p>To what extent are assessment and selection processes fair and consistent?</p> <p>What evidence is there that the appointments process does not impact adversely on particular groups?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that candidate information and documentation reflect good practice, comply with legislation and are free from bias?</p> <p>How transparent and open is the NICS in its dealings with candidates at all stages of the recruitment process?</p>

Requirements of the Code	Principles of the Recruitment Code			
	Merit	Fit for Purpose	Fair	Open/Transparent
	<p>To what extent are conflicts of interest considered?</p> <p>To what extent are appointments made in order of merit?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that public confidence in recruitment to the NICS is promoted and enhanced during the appointments process?</p>		<p>What evidence is there that candidates are kept well informed at all stages of the appointments process?</p>
3. Training	<p>What evidence is there that all those involved in recruitment are trained to agreed quality standards?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that those involved in selection and recruitment have the necessary and appropriate level of knowledge, skills and experience?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that training demonstrates a real commitment to diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity?</p>	<p>To what extent is recruitment and selection training available and accessible to all relevant staff?</p>
4. Communication	<p>What evidence is there that communication with candidates reflects and supports the Merit Principle?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that there is effective communication between all those involved in the process?</p>	<p>To what extent is there fair, effective and timely communication with candidates at all stages of the process?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that communication with candidates is comprehensive, accurate and helpful?</p>

Requirements of the Code	Principles of the Recruitment Code			
	Merit	Fit for Purpose	Fair	Open/Transparent
5. Management and Quality Assurance Arrangements	To what extent do the management and quality assurance arrangements for recruitment demonstrate effective adherence to the Code?	<p>To what extent are the design and deployment of management and quality assurance processes consistent with good practice in an organisation of the size and complexity of the NICS?</p> <p>To what extent does senior management give regular attention to strategic recruitment issues?</p> <p>What evidence is there that measures are in place to ensure that all those involved in the recruitment process are appropriately trained?</p> <p>What evidence is there that the proper completion and retention of all records supports each stage of the process and promotes the Merit Principle?</p>	What evidence is there that the NICS takes measures to ensure that recruitment policies and practices are fair and impartial?	To what extent are there measures in place to ensure that management arrangements and quality assurance standards are open and transparent and shared with key stakeholders?

Requirements of the Code	Principles of the Recruitment Code			
	Merit	Fit for Purpose	Fair	Open/Transparent
6. Exceptions to Merit	<p>To what extent are appointments by way of exception to the Merit Principle warranted?</p> <p>What evidence is there that such exceptions are rare?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that all exceptions to the Merit Principle are monitored and managed appropriately as part of Departmental accountability arrangements?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that due regard is given to the potential for unfair treatment of those who are not given the opportunity to be considered for the appointment in question?</p>	<p>To what extent does the NICS provide public assurance that appointments by exception are rare and warranted?</p>
7. Publication of Recruitment Information	<p>To what extent does the published information, which has been specified, enable Commissioners to make an assessment that the merit principle has been upheld?</p>	<p>To what extent can the public be assured that systems are in place to ensure that selection is made in accordance with the Recruitment Code?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that the information / data is analysed appropriately and the analysis used to inform future recruitment practice?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that published information / data is valid, accurate, accessible, timely and relevant?</p>

AUDIT FRAMEWORK

Part 2: Key Performance Questions and associated Key Performance Indicators

The audit framework is in two parts and derives from the principles and requirements of the Recruitment Code.

Part 2 sets out a menu of key performance questions, together with the associated key performance indicators (KPIs). KPIs “answer” KPQs and provide evidence and information which enable Commissioners to understand to what extent the requirements of the Code are being observed.

1. ATTRACTING CANDIDATES

MERIT

To what extent is the actual pool of candidates representative of the potential pool of eligible candidates?

- evaluation of previous data is used to inform affirmative action measures;
- comparative analysis between the actual and potential applicant pools is undertaken and any imbalances identified.

What evidence is there that in making further appointments from existing merit lists, the NICS upholds the Merit Principle and adheres to the requirements of the Code?

- where it is known at the outset of a competition that more than one vacancy exists, details of all such vacancies are communicated clearly to potential applicants in all advertising and candidate information;
- where specific additional vacancies are not known at the outset, all advertising and candidate information states explicitly and prominently that the merit list may be used to fill posts with similar duties and responsibilities in any of the NICS Departments; the post advertised and any future vacancies stipulate the same eligibility requirements;
- Candidate information details clearly how long merit lists will be valid for.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

To what extent does the NICS attract the widest possible pool of candidates to meet its current and future needs?

- consideration is given to ensuring that advertising is effective in reaching the widest pool of candidates;
- measures to attract candidates reflect good practice;
- where executive search is used consultants have been aware of and adhere to the requirements of the Recruitment Code and the NICS Policies and Procedures Manual.

FAIR

To what extent are career opportunities in the NICS accessible to all sections of the community?

- candidate information and briefing materials are accessible and free from bias;
- candidate information and briefing materials correspond closely with both the job description and person specification and assessment process to be used.

To what extent do policies and practices promote diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity to enable the NICS to attract the widest pool of candidates?

- effective measures are taken to address under-representation at all levels.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

What evidence is there that potential and actual barriers to broad appeal are identified and removed and that appropriate outreach measures are in place?

- potential and actual barriers are identified;
- outreach measures are demonstrably effective.

To what extent do all the means of communication with candidates promote confidence in the recruitment process and encourage applications?

- candidates find the recruitment-related materials clear, accessible and easily understood.

2. ASSESSMENT, SELECTION AND APPOINTMENT PROCESSES

MERIT

To what extent do the eligible and / or shortlisted candidates reflect both the potential and actual pool of candidates?

- analysis and evaluation of data is carried out routinely for all competitions;
- comparative analysis between the eligible and shortlisted candidates and the actual and potential applicant pools is undertaken and any imbalances identified.

To what extent do assessment and selection methodologies serve and safeguard the Merit Principle?

- assessment and selection methodologies enable clear differentiation between candidates and ensure the person(s) selected best meets the requirements of the post.

To what extent are conflicts of interest considered?

- all conflicts of interest including knowledge of candidates, either personal or professional are recorded and considered and appropriate action is taken, as required.

To what extent are appointments made in order of merit?

- the interval of time between selection and offer of appointment is such that it does not impact adversely on merit;
- an analysis of uptake applicant groups is carried out;
- where the competition is used to fill future vacancies with similar duties and responsibilities at SCS level, the subsequent appointment is made in a fair and timely manner and Commissioners' approval process is satisfied;
- all selection decisions rest with the Panel;
- recruitment decisions are free from political influence and safeguard the non-partisanship of the Civil Service.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

To what extent are those selected for panels sufficiently diverse and expert to ensure appointment on Merit?

- nature and composition of selection panels are monitored.

To what extent do assessment and selection procedures ensure selection on the basis of merit, reflect good practice and promote public confidence in recruitment to the NICS?

- job descriptions and person specifications are identified, considered and endorsed by appropriate sponsors at the earliest stages;

- job descriptions and person specifications are informed and supported by job analysis and are reflected consistently throughout the selection process;
- selection criteria are clear, objective, fair and derived directly from the key requirements of the job description and person specification;
- application forms are clear, accessible and do not make unfair or unreasonable demands on applicants;
- interview questions are clear, objective, fair and are derived directly from the job description and person specification and provide a rigorous test of the requirements of the post;
- clear, meaningful and transparent reasons for satisfying / not satisfying eligibility and / or shortlisting criteria are recorded in full;
- selection criteria promote the principles of diversity, inclusivity, and equality of opportunity;
- assessment and selection processes are timely and do not result in undue delay.

What evidence is there that public confidence in recruitment to the NICS is promoted and enhanced during the appointments process?

- offers of appointment are timely and not subject to undue delay.

For appointments to Permanent Secretary (or a very limited number of other SCS posts located outside this jurisdiction, as specified in Commissioners' Recruitment Code) where Ministerial involvement is permitted:

- the nature and extent of Ministerial involvement is recorded by Departments and does not exceed the provisions of the Code;
- all relevant documentation, including the merit list, is referred to Commissioners before the name of the lead candidate is provided to the Minister;
- the Minister is provided, in writing, with only the name of the candidate placed first on the merit list;
- the Minister does not meet the candidate placed first on the merit list prior to appointment.

FAIR

To what extent are assessment and selection processes fair and consistent?

- significant disparities in past success rates between groups, potential adverse impact and diversity issues are considered and addressed in advance;
- selection processes do not disadvantage any particular applicant group;
- actions are taken to ameliorate adverse impact;
- policies and practices ensure that candidates with disabilities receive reasonable adjustments;
- candidate assessment booklets are completed in a clear and thorough manner by all panel members and are sufficient to enable meaningful and purposeful feedback.

What evidence is there that the appointments process does not impact adversely on particular groups?

- terms and conditions are consistent with those set out in the Candidate Information Booklet;
- the appointments process accommodates reasonable adjustments;
- prior to making further appointments from an existing merit list, due consideration is given to the potential impact of the passage of time on the marketplace and, thereby, the field of potential applicants.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

What evidence is there that candidate information and documentation reflect good practice, comply with legislation and are free from bias?

- information and briefing materials enable candidates to understand clearly the assessment and selection process, what is expected of them and how assessment methodologies and selection procedures are applied.

How transparent and open is the NICS in its dealings with candidates at all stages of the recruitment process?

- relevant points of contact are identified clearly at all stages;
- comments, enquiries, complaints are dealt with in a timely and helpful manner;
- feedback is clear and meaningful.

For appointments to Permanent Secretary (or a very limited number of other SCS posts located outside this jurisdiction, as specified in Commissioners' Recruitment Code) where Ministerial involvement is permitted:

- documentation details clearly the specific role and contribution of the Minister at all relevant stages;
- Ministerial involvement is identified in the job information;
- any decision not to endorse a lead candidate is recorded in accordance with the Recruitment Code.

What evidence is there that candidates are kept well informed at all stages of the appointments process?

- communication with candidates is clear, timely and helpful;
- regular communication ensures candidates are kept up-to-date with the progress of the appointment.

3. TRAINING

MERIT

What evidence is there that all those involved in recruitment are trained to agreed quality standards?

- training provides an understanding of, and promotes adherence to, the Code and its four principles;
- training evaluates the extent of learning and knowledge, and application of the Code and its requirements.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

What evidence is there that those involved in selection and recruitment have the necessary and appropriate level of knowledge, skills and experience?

- appropriate training is available and delivered on a timely basis to all those involved in the recruitment and selection process;
- training covers not only the structure of the process, but also the skills involved and the recruitment context;
- training is responsive to need, refreshed regularly and is delivered to a consistent standard reflecting good practice;
- training includes awareness and understanding of roles and responsibilities and functions of key contributors at each stage of the process;
- training is undertaken by each contributor and panel member prior to their involvement in the recruitment and selection process;
- training is monitored and evaluated regularly, with regard to its quality and efficacy and the necessary follow up action taken.

FAIR

What evidence is there that training demonstrates a real commitment to diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity?

- training addresses equality and diversity considerations, outreach measures, adverse impact, fair participation and relevant legislation;
- training involves appropriate use of a wide range of assessment tools and techniques, including the application and interpretation of tests.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

To what extent is recruitment and selection training available and accessible to all relevant staff?

- reasonable adjustments are put in place to ensure staff with disabilities can access recruitment and selection training.

4. COMMUNICATION

MERIT

What evidence is there that communication with candidates reflects and supports the Merit Principle?

- candidates consider recruitment related communications to be clear, timely and effective;
- as appropriate, communication with candidates is clear and explicit about the intention to use the merit list to make further appointments and about the reasons and process for doing so.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

What evidence is there that there is effective communication between all those involved in the process?

- panels are provided with appropriate professional HR advice and guidance at key stages of the process;
- there is a clear and shared understanding of respective roles and responsibilities;
- the requirements of the Recruitment Code are applied by all;
- panel members or other key contributors are given specific opportunity to raise concerns about any aspect of a competition;
- panel members have equal and shared access to competition related information.

FAIR

To what extent is there fair, effective and timely communication with candidates at all stages of the process?

- candidates receive clear, meaningful and timely feedback;
- all communications are equally accessible to both internal and external candidates and all Section 75 groups.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

What evidence is there that communication with candidates is comprehensive, accurate and helpful?

- comments, enquiries and / or complaints are dealt with in an efficient, appropriate and timely manner;
- learning drawn from comments / enquiries / complaints is applied for the purpose of improvement.

5. MANAGEMENT AND QUALITY ASSURANCE ARRANGEMENTS

MERIT

To what extent do the management and quality assurance arrangements for recruitment demonstrate effective adherence to the Code?

- measures are in place to ensure that policies and practices comply with legislation and are consistent with the Recruitment Code;
- management and quality assurance arrangements ensure adherence to the Recruitment Code;
- Commissioners' expectations in relation to the practice of filling additional posts from existing merit lists are reflected appropriately in all relevant NICS policy advice and guidance materials, and all those involved in the recruitment / selection process are aware of these.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

To what extent are the design and deployment of management and quality assurance processes consistent with good practice in an organisation of the size and complexity of the NICS?

- robust and effective management and quality assurance processes are applied to all elements and stages of recruitment;
- effective competition evaluation identifies and disseminates lessons learned.

To what extent does senior management give regular attention to strategic recruitment issues?

- DoF considers regularly the effectiveness and business benefit of recruitment policies and practices;
- The NICS Board provides service-wide leadership in progressing diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity in recruitment.

What evidence is there that measures are in place to ensure that all those involved in the recruitment process are appropriately trained?

- specific roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and understood;
- training outcomes are evaluated and used to inform future practice;
- competition evaluations record that panels receive appropriate professional HR expertise and guidance at key stages of the recruitment and selection process;
- competition evaluations are analysed and learning applied.

What evidence is there that the proper completion and retention of all records, supports each stage of the process and promotes the Merit Principle?

- relevant accurate documentation and data are readily available and accessible to the Commissioners for the purposes of Audit;
- records and documentation are of the required quality and standard;

- records and documentation facilitate an assessment of fairness and consistency at all stages of the process;
- records and documentation are clear and easily understood by all.

FAIR

What evidence is there that the NICS takes measures to ensure that Recruitment Policies and Practices are fair and impartial?

- reporting mechanisms for all conflicts of interest, either actual or perceived, are in place and recorded information is sufficient to enable oversight and if required, action;
- monitoring and evaluation demonstrate that policies and practices do not discriminate unlawfully;
- monitoring and evaluation demonstrate that policies and practices satisfy all legislative statutory code requirements;
- monitoring and evaluation of tribunal findings and outcomes and other recruitment related complaints / appeals inform policy and practice.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

To what extent are there measures in place to ensure that management arrangements and quality assurance standards are open and transparent and shared with key stakeholders?

- steps are taken to ensure that those involved in the recruitment process are familiar with the requirements of Code;
- measures are taken to ensure that records and documentation are readily available and accessible for the purposes of audit;
- management arrangements and quality standards are published and made available to all key stakeholders.

6. EXCEPTIONS TO MERIT

MERIT

To what extent are appointments by way of exception to the Merit Principle warranted?

- Departments record a strong and compelling case to depart from the Merit Principle
- requests for appointment are clearly and demonstrably based on legislative or business imperatives;
- Departments have exhausted all other possibilities in reaching the decision to depart from the Merit Principle;
- Departments present clear justification as to why it is not reasonable or practicable to make the appointment in question by way of an open competition;
- those appointed under Regulation 3(d) are demonstrably recognised for their excellence and / or unique abilities in a particular field and the expertise is not otherwise available in the NICS;
- Departmental application of exceptions give appropriate consideration to the obligation to ensure compliance with relevant employment and equality legislation and statutory codes of practice;
- where a Department makes an appointment under one of the categories of exception to the Merit Principle detailed in the Recruitment Code, NICS HR monitors, reports and quality assures such decisions across the NICS.

What evidence is there that such exceptions are rare?

- nature, frequency, number and pattern of exceptions by Department and across the NICS are recorded;
- analysis of patterns and trends is carried out;
- NICS Departments take steps to reduce the likelihood of the future use of exceptions.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

What evidence is there that all exceptions to the Merit Principle are monitored and managed appropriately as part of Departmental accountability arrangements?

- those persons who transfer in to the NICS were selected originally on Merit;
- secondees and appointees are assessed formally as being capable of undertaking effectively the duties of the post and records are kept as to how that assessment is made, as applicable;
- appointments are made in accordance with the categories as set out in Regulation 3;
- circumstances and reasons are recorded clearly;
- planning and management arrangements take account of the fixed term nature of appointments, as applicable;

- persons who have completed a secondment are not re-appointed as a secondee for a period of at least that of the original secondment unless approval has been granted by Commissioners;
- arrangements are in place ensure that an effective skills transfer takes place, where appropriate;
- arrangements are in place to fill the post by open competition at the earliest opportunity, where appropriate.

FAIR

What evidence is there that due regard is given to the potential for unfair treatment of those who are not given the opportunity to be considered for the appointment in question?

- Departments demonstrate that they examine and eliminate all other possibilities;
- Departments scope and consider the potential pool of candidates;
- records are kept on how suitability for appointment has been assessed.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

To what extent does the NICS provide public assurance that appointments by exception are rare and warranted?

- details of the appointments made under Regulation 3 are clear, readily accessible and understood;
- details of appointments made under Regulation 3 are published by the NICS under the Commissioners' requirements.

7. PUBLICATION OF RECRUITMENT INFORMATION

MERIT

To what extent does the published information which has been specified enable Commissioners to make an assessment that the Merit Principle has been upheld?

- validated information is available to Commissioners to enable assessment of adherence to the requirements of the Code;
- the information published complies with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

To what extent can the public be assured that systems are in place to ensure that selection is made in accordance with the Recruitment Code?

- timely and effective monitoring of adherence to policies and practices is undertaken;
- details of exceptions to merit are recorded and monitored;
- statistical summaries of all recruitment activity, analysed by Section 75 monitoring information, are published;
- actions and initiatives are undertaken in the reporting year to attract candidates and promote diversity;
- actions and initiatives undertaken in the reporting year to target areas of specific under-representation;
- a report on the outcomes as a result of actions or initiatives taken.

FAIR

What evidence is there that the information / data is analysed appropriately and to what extent is the analysis used to inform future recruitment practice?

- thorough analysis is carried out routinely and regularly at all levels and grades;
- results of data analysis inform recruitment practice.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

To what extent is the published information / data valid, accurate, accessible, timely and relevant?

- published information meets the requirements of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics;
- published information is timely and meets the requirements as specified by Commissioners.

APPENDIX B: AUDIT EVIDENCE

Appropriate Evidence

For evidence to be appropriate, the information must be relevant, reliable and valid.

Relevance refers to the extent to which the information bears a clear and logical relationship to the audit criteria and objectives.

Reliability refers to determining the same findings either when the audit test is repeated, or when information is obtained from other sources.

Validity refers to whether the information actually is what it purports to be in relation to content, origin and timing.

Sufficient evidence

The concepts of sufficient (quantity) and appropriate (quality) evidence are interrelated. The quantity of evidence is sufficient if, when taken as a whole, its weight is adequate to provide persuasive support for the contents of the audit report. In exercising professional judgement, auditors will ask themselves whether the collective weight of the evidence that exists would be enough to persuade a reasonable person that the observations and conclusions are valid and that the recommendations are appropriate.

Sources and types of audit evidence

There are three broad sources for the information that constitutes audit evidence;

- information gathered by the audit team (primary evidence)
- information gathered by the audited organisation (secondary evidence)
- information gathered by third parties (secondary evidence)

Forms of Evidence

Audit evidence may take a variety of forms:

- physical evidence – typically obtained by the auditors' direct inspection or observations and supported by field notes etc. wherever possible;
- testimonial evidence – includes oral or written statements obtained in response to the audit team's enquiries;
- documentary evidence – evidence obtained from such sources as files, performance reports, databases, minutes of meetings, organisation charts and correspondence; and
- analytical evidence – from manipulating other types of evidence using analytical techniques such as computations, comparisons, and content analysis of qualitative data.

Taking account of the work of others

In the interests of audit efficiency, audit teams will take account of the available relevant work of internal audit and review, internal and external experts, and specialists as appropriate.