



**Civil Service
Commissioners**
for Northern Ireland



ANNUAL REPORT

2024-25

**ENSURING APPOINTMENT ON MERIT
AND SUPPORTING ETHICAL STANDARDS**





**Civil Service
Commissioners**
for Northern Ireland

OUR VISION:

A Civil Service for Northern Ireland which innovatively and effectively promotes the most talented and diverse people in a fair and inclusive manner which upholds the Merit Principle.

OUR MISSION:

To ensure fairness and encourage innovation to give the public confidence in appointments to the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS).

We, as Civil Service Commissioners for
Northern Ireland, present this Report
on our work during the period

1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025

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Deirdre Toner
Chairperson

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Sinéad Burns

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Dr Lesley Carroll

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CHAIRPERSON'S REVIEW

I am delighted to present this Annual Report on behalf of the Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland and, in doing so, to reflect on the challenges and achievements of the past year.

As always, I wish to thank and pay tribute to my fellow Commissioners, Sinéad Burns and Dr Lesley Carroll, for their dedication, support and assistance during 2024-25 in what was a particularly busy and eventful year. My thanks also go to the Secretariat for delivering effective and efficient support services with limited resources.

As a collective, Commissioners wish to pay tribute to the NICS for its continued and relentless work, dedication and commitment to providing high quality public services. We are committed to supporting all departments, within the scope of our remit, to ensure that the NICS attracts and appoints the best people with the right skills and continues to appoint on merit, through fair and open competition.



The Programme for Government, published in February 2025, outlines ambitions which will require the appropriate skills and people to deliver. The NICS has produced its People Plan 2024-2025 and launched its People Strategy 2025-2030 and we look forward to working closely with the NICS in the year ahead on recruitment and selection matters and, importantly, on the streamlining of recruitment.

In September 2024, Commissioners hosted Baroness Gisela Stuart, the UK Civil Service Commission's First Commissioner, and Kate Owen, Chief Executive, in Belfast.

The day's programme was designed to ensure that our visitors had an opportunity to meet with Senior Civil Servants; to hear about positive developments in recruitment and selection to the NICS; and to enjoy a glimpse of Belfast hospitality.

For Commissioners and their Secretariat, 2024-25 has been a year of achievement, reflection, review and recalibration. We invested time in thinking about our future strategic direction. We reviewed our Core Values and Strategic Priorities to make them less about measuring compliance and more about supporting transformation. We engaged with key stakeholders, including Dr Jayne Brady, Head of the Civil Service (HOCS), and all of the Permanent Secretaries. We are grateful to them for entering into frank and open discussions with us and providing insights into how we might deliver our statutory role in a meaningful, independent yet supportive manner. Our new approach is articulated in our Strategic Plan for 2025-2029.

We reviewed our Recruitment Code and our Auditing for Improvement framework, making changes to improve clarity and alignment. Commissioners were actively involved in our audit function, directly observing competitions below Senior Civil Service (SCS).

We continued our engagement with representative groups to hear first-hand the lived experiences of those from different backgrounds, particularly in relation to access to the world of work and barriers to recruitment.

Keen to lead by example, we were delighted to achieve Diversity Mark accreditation in November 2024 and now look forward to welcoming new Commissioners to the team to bring diversity of thought and experience as we deliver our statutory duties in an ever changing society and amid global uncertainty.

As we begin 2025-26, the appetite for transformation is palpable across the NICS and also in our own organisation. I am encouraged by the energy and collaboration I have seen driving this forward and we, as Commissioners, look forward to playing our role, while always maintaining our independence.

DEIRDRE TONER
CHAIRPERSON



REVIEW AND RECALIBRATION 2024-25

In 2024-25, Commissioners reviewed how they deliver their statutory functions and how their regulatory role could best add value to recruitment and selection. Following consultation with key stakeholders, Commissioners agreed a **Strategic Plan for 2025-2029**.

Strategic Plan 2025-2029

The Plan identifies new core values and strategic priorities that are fundamental in assisting Commissioners to achieve their vision and mission.

Core Values:

Commissioners are committed at all times to adhering to the seven principles of public life, with **integrity** and **objectivity** as key to their role. In addition, Commissioners and their Secretariat identified the following values as underpinning their strategic vision and mission:

-  **Independence**
-  **Collaboration**
-  **Innovation**
-  **Quality**

Strategic Priorities:

-  **Priority 1:** Safeguard the Merit Principle to support an impartial and independent NICS.
-  **Priority 2:** Support the NICS to attract the most talented and diverse people.
-  **Priority 3:** Encourage innovation and influence positive change in recruitment to the NICS.
-  **Priority 4:** Develop a diverse and supportive internal culture with an ethos of good governance.

THE ROLE OF COMMISSIONERS

Who are the Civil Service Commissioners?

Commissioners are independent of the NICS and this is fundamental to their role. As senior leaders from the private, public and voluntary sectors, they bring a wide range of experience from diverse backgrounds, careers and interests to the position. Commissioners are free from personal and political patronage and are recruited through public advertisement in a fair and open recruitment competition.

Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland are appointed by Royal Warrant to uphold the principle that appointments to posts in the NICS should be made on merit. This principle, known as the Merit Principle, is underpinned by fair and open competition. Commissioners regulate how appointments should be made to the NICS by way of open competition to ensure adherence to the Merit Principle. This applies at all grades.

Commissioners set out in their **Strategic Plan 2020-2025** that they will safeguard an impartial and independent Northern Ireland Civil Service by maintaining the principle of selection on merit.



Dr Lesley Carroll, Commissioner; Deirdre Toner, Chairperson; and Sinéad Burns, Commissioner.

Commissioners will achieve this by:

- ▶ Prescribing and publishing a Recruitment Code and ensuring it remains fit for purpose;
- ▶ Prescribing in General Regulations the permitted exceptions to the Merit Principle;
- ▶ Responding to requests to make appointments under permitted exceptions to the Merit Principle (where the Recruitment Code expressly provides that written approval is required);
- ▶ Providing approval for appointments to the Senior Civil Service (SCS) and chairing SCS recruitment competitions;
- ▶ Auditing NICS recruitment policies and practices to establish whether the Recruitment Code is being observed;
- ▶ Seeking assurance that all civil servants are recruited on the basis of fair and open competition;
- ▶ Requiring the publication of NICS recruitment related information, including the use of permitted exceptions; and
- ▶ Engaging with the NICS and relevant stakeholders.

The Strategic Plan is underpinned by annual Business Plans, which set out in more detail how Commissioners' vision and priorities will be delivered.

While internal transfer and/or promotion are outside the remit of Commissioners, the broad principles set out in Commissioners' Recruitment Code reflect good practice and Commissioners consider they are applicable equally to internal appointments in order to safeguard the Merit Principle.

In addition, Commissioners also have a role in considering and determining appeals made by existing civil servants under the [**NICS Code of Ethics**](#).

RECRUITMENT CODE V.16

In 2024-25, Commissioners consulted with the NICS on proposed amendments to their Recruitment Code which are intended to:

- ▶ provide clarity and improve understanding of Commissioners' role, particularly in relation to 'Ministerial Involvement';
- ▶ allow conversion from temporary to permanent appointments (under Regulation 3(e)) with a shorter period of notice, in acknowledgement that some schemes were designed to last for a shorter duration of, for example, 6-9 months;
- ▶ make it gender neutral; and
- ▶ align it with Commissioners' Auditing for Improvement Framework.

We look forward to publishing version 16 of our Recruitment Code early in 2025-26.

COMMISSIONERS' STATUTORY AUDIT FUNCTION

Commissioners determine if the Recruitment Code is being observed using:

- ▶ Mandated monitoring and reporting requirements for the NICS
- ▶ An evidence-based assurance framework
- ▶ Commissioners' Annual Audit Plan
- ▶ Commissioners' Article 6 Approval Process

Mandated Monitoring and Reporting Requirements for the NICS

Monitoring and reporting requirements for the NICS are mandated under Appendix C of the Recruitment Code. Commissioners require:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) evidence to provide assurance that systems are in place in the NICS to ensure that selection for appointment is made in accordance with the Recruitment Code; (b) evidence to provide assurance that recruitment policies and practices in the NICS are subject to regular internal monitoring; (c) details of the appointments made under Regulation 3 (Exceptions) of the Commissioners' General Regulations 2007; (d) statistical summaries, in a format which the Commissioners may specify, of all recruitment activity during the publication period, including analyses by all categories covered by Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998; | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (e) any actions or initiatives undertaken in the reporting year to attract candidates, and advance a recruitment-related agenda for diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity and which specifically target areas of under-representation; (f) a report on the outcomes as a result of any such actions or initiatives referred to at (e) above; and (g) any other relevant information in a specified format regarding recruitment and selection as Commissioners may require. |
|---|--|

The NICS has published this information, which Commissioners have scrutinised, in the [Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report 2024](#) and the [Analysis of NICS Recruitment Competitions 2024](#) reports.

Evidence-based Assurance Framework

Commissioners require the Department of Finance (DoF) Permanent Secretary to sign off the annual 'Permanent Secretary Statement of Compliance on Recruitment'. This confirms adherence to the Commissioners' Recruitment Code for all appointments made to NICS Departments during the annual reporting period, bolstering the evidence-based assurance framework and strengthening formal accountability at the most senior levels within the NICS.

The assurance framework is managed by the NICS and is comprised of the following key components:

- ▶ regular reviews of external competitions;
- ▶ monitoring of exceptional appointments and extensions to merit lists;
- ▶ assurance statements signed by HRConnect and Competition Leads when running an external competition;
- ▶ annual assurances from all Grade 7s within NICS resourcing teams;
- ▶ annual confirmation from Permanent Secretaries/Accounting Officers that all appointments have been managed by NICS resourcing teams, including appointments made as Exceptions to Merit; and
- ▶ assurance that equality monitoring has been carried out on all competitions which closed to appointments during 2024; that the NICS competition monitoring processes include comparative analysis between actual and potential applicant pools; and that findings are used to inform the NICS' programme of outreach activity to encourage under-represented groups to apply.

The above evidence is collated by the NICS and provided to the DoF Permanent Secretary for consideration. If satisfied, the DoF Permanent Secretary issues the annual Statement of Compliance to Commissioners.

Commissioners have received the signed statement from the DoF Permanent Secretary confirming adherence to the Commissioners' Recruitment Code for all appointments made to NICS Departments during 2024.

Commissioners' Audit Plan 2024-25

Commissioners hold dedicated audit meetings, which allow them to give detailed consideration to audit matters arising from their Audit Plan each year. They also hold twice yearly audit and engagement meetings with the NICS to discuss their audit findings and expectations, along with any other recruitment issues. During 2024-25 the following audits were carried out:

Audit of Article 6 Assurance Process

Commissioners carried out an audit of the Article 6 Approval Process for two competitions for SCS appointments. The audit made recommendations relating to record keeping in relation to three assurances, which the NICS has agreed to address.

Overall, Commissioners are satisfied that the Article 6 Approval Process is operating in accordance with their requirements and therefore audits of the process will be carried out in future on an ad hoc, rather than annual, basis.

Review of NICS Appointments below SCS made under Regulation 3(a) of the 2007 General Regulations

Commissioners carried out an audit of NICS appointments below SCS made by way of exception to the Merit Principle, specifically under Regulation 3(a) of the 2007 General Regulations, where the person is appointed on secondment. The audit looked for evidence that policies, procedures and practices met the requirements of the Recruitment Code and Audit Framework, with specific objectives as follows:

- | | |
|---|--|
| a) to review appointments below SCS made by way of exception under Regulation 3(a) in order to ensure business cases, and records of engagement with NICS HR, demonstrate strong and compelling grounds to depart from the Merit Principle and justify why it is not practicable to make appointments in accordance with the Merit Principle; | b) to provide Commissioners and the NICS with assurances that the requirements of the Recruitment Code as laid out at A.21 – A.24 have been observed in relation to such appointments; and |
| | c) to make recommendations where evidence would indicate that policies, procedures or practices are insufficient to meet the requirements of the Code. |

The audit found that there is variation across departments in how the requirements of the Recruitment Code are applied. Whilst a number of the audit samples of business cases demonstrated that the respective departmental officials had applied the Recruitment Code there was an absence of evidence that the remainder of departmental officials had done so. In some instances, business cases were unavailable; in others, business cases did not cover all the information required.

Therefore, whilst those business cases examined found justification for the use of the exception, the findings provided insufficient evidence to assure Commissioners that the requirements of the Recruitment Code have been observed in relation to appointments made below SCS under Regulation 3(a). Commissioners discussed these findings with the NICS at an audit and engagement meeting. As a result, the NICS implemented a number of actions to effect improvement. This included revision of the wording in the Permanent Secretary Assurance Statements to directly provide assurance that Exceptions to Merit have been made in line with the Recruitment Code and following consultation with the NICS HR function and updated requirements for business cases for inward secondments.

In issuing their outcomes letter to the NICS on their conclusions from the audit, Commissioners made two recommendations:

- ▶ That the NICS should engage with Departmental Boards on the requirements of the NICS Secondment Policy and Secondment Guidance; and
- ▶ That the NICS should amend the business case template to (a) seek details of engagement with NICS HR prior to the inward secondment being organised; and (b) to include questions in relation to re-engagement of a previous secondee before the appropriate period has elapsed and on succession plans for when the secondment comes to an end.

The management response to these recommendations will be reported on in our next Annual Report.

Review of Key Stages of Competitions below SCS

As part of their audit plan, Commissioners observed key stages of competitions below SCS (the Competition Initiation Meeting, the sift and pre-board meeting and interviews). The purpose of the audit was to examine the application of the Recruitment Code at these stages to ensure that the processes and procedures were consistent with upholding the Merit Principle. Accordingly, the objectives were to:

- a. consider the extent to which the application of processes connected to attracting candidates; selection, assessment and appointment processes; training; and communication meet the purpose of the review; and
- b. bring to the attention of NICSHR where evidence would indicate that policies, procedures or practices are insufficient to meet requirements of the Code.

Commissioners found that the processes and procedures observed were consistent with upholding the Merit Principle. However, they provided feedback to the NICS on areas where improvements could be made to encourage innovation and to help panels focus on achieving the best fit between candidates and the requirements of the job. This included:

- a. Confidence of panel members to fulfil their role
- b. Knowledge of HR and what is permissible under policy
- c. Clearly articulated job roles and design of criteria to ensure the process attracts and selects the candidates who are best able to do the job
- d. Focus on internal vs external pools

Commissioners' Article 6 Approval Process

During 2024-25 Commissioners chaired all SCS competitions and, based on their own participation and the written assurances provided to Commissioners by HRConnect at each stage of the recruitment process, concluded that each competition was managed and progressed in accordance with the requirements of the Recruitment Code. Accordingly,

and in line with the requirements of Article 6 of the Civil Service Commissioners (NI) Order 1999, Commissioners gave written approval for appointments to the SCS to be made from these competitions. Details of the competitions chaired can be found on pages 19 to 20.

Has the Recruitment Code been Observed?

Commissioners' 2024-25 Audit & Review Opinion

Having examined the range of evidence gathered throughout 2024-25, and published by the NICS, it is Commissioners' opinion that, based on the information available, the NICS recruitment and selection practices are largely in keeping with the requirements set out in the Recruitment Code. However, during 2024-25 Commissioners became aware that there were a number of

individuals appointed to Departments from the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) who were actually temporary civil servants appointed as Exceptions to Merit (see page 24), rather than consultants. Commissioners intend to write to the Head of the Civil Service and Permanent Secretaries about the matter and are hopeful that the SIB Review will address the issue. We will continue to monitor this area.

Commissioners' Audit Plan 2025-26

Annual Audit Plans set out the scheduled audit topics for the year ahead and will be reported on each year in the Commissioners' Annual Report. For 2025-26 Commissioners' audit and review will cover:

- ▶ Review of Pre-recorded Interview Process (IRC298527 & IRC303169); and
- ▶ Audit of Competitions below SCS (6 competitions).

SENIOR CIVIL SERVICE AUTHORISATION PROCESS

All appointments to the SCS made through open competition require the approval of Commissioners as set out in Article 6 of the Civil Service Commissioners (NI) Order 1999. The statutory duty placed upon Commissioners to ensure that the principle of selection on merit on the basis of fair and open competition is maintained can best be discharged by Commissioners chairing all open SCS competitions. In addition, Commissioners' Article 6 Approval Process requires a number of assurances from HRConnect in relation to the competition process.

In support of the request for approval of appointments under the Article 6 Approval Process, relevant recruitment information is provided by HRConnect to Commissioners at four key stages of the SCS recruitment process.

During this year Commissioners approved 24 appointments. These are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Appointments approved from Senior Civil Service Competitions during 2024-25

POST	LEAD NICS DEPARTMENT
Chief Environmental Health Officer Grade 5	Department of Health
Deputy Secretary, Work and Health / Operational Delivery Group Grade 3 (x2)	Department for Communities
Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services / Engaged Communities Group Grade 3 (x2)	Department for Communities
Legislative Counsel Grade 5 (x4)	The Executive Office
Chief Digital Information Officer Grade 3	Department of Health
Director of Strategic Policy Division Grade 5	Department of Finance
Director of People Policy and Director of Pay, Strategy and Workforce Planning Grade 5 (x2)	Department of Finance
Assistant Director of Public Prosecutions Grade 5	Public Prosecution Service
Director of Health Estates Grade 5	Department of Health
Director of People Services Grade 5	Department of Finance
Director of the NI Bureau in Washington Grade 5	The Executive Office
Director of Rating Policy Grade 5	Department of Finance
Finance Director Grade 5 (x2)	Department for Communities & Department of Education
Director of Digital Security and Information Services Grade 5 (x2)	Department for Communities
Director of Regional Planning, Governance and Legislation Grade 5	Department for Infrastructure
Assistant Solicitor – Departmental Solicitors Office Grade 5	Department of Finance

APPOINTMENTS MADE BY WAY OF EXCEPTION TO MERIT

As with any principle, there may be particular circumstances where exceptions to the Merit Principle are justified.

Regulation 3 of Commissioners' General Regulations 2007 permits appointments to be made other than in accordance with the Merit Principle in the following circumstances:

- a) where the person is appointed on secondment;
- b) where the person to be appointed holds a situation in another Civil Service of the Crown;
- c) where the person to be appointed is, or has recently been, employed on functions which have been or are being transferred to the Crown;
- d) where the person to be appointed is of proven distinction and exceptional reasons relating to the business needs of the Civil Service provide justification for the appointment;

- e) where the person has been selected for an appointment under Government programmes or initiatives; and
- f) where the person has previously held a situation in the Civil Service and is being reinstated (this provision may be used only to reinstate former civil servants following a period of parliamentary candidature or membership).

Further details on these exceptions are provided in Commissioners' Recruitment Code.

Commissioners' objective in permitting exceptions is to provide flexibility where it can be justified as necessary and appropriate to meet the business needs of the NICS.

The Recruitment Code permits Departments to make certain appointments via Exception to Merit. Departments must adhere to the specific guidance in the Recruitment Code in relation to each exception. The specific approval of Commissioners is required for the following:

- ▶ SCS appointments (all Regulations);
- ▶ extension of secondments beyond 3 years (Regulation 3a);
- ▶ appointments under Regulation 3(d); and
- ▶ approval of government schemes or initiatives under Regulation 3(e) and any requests to make appointments permanent following completion of a temporary scheme or initiative.

Commissioners consider NICS requests for appointments to be made by way of exception to the Merit Principle on a case-by-case basis and all requests must be submitted via NICSHR/People & Organisational Development (People & OD). Departments must justify to Commissioners why it is not reasonably practicable to make the appointment in accordance with the Merit Principle, in order that Commissioners may be satisfied that appointment by exception is warranted. Commissioners will seek further information to aid their decision-making process if appropriate.

Commissioners require NICSHR to manage and monitor all appointments made by way of Exception to Merit under Regulation 3 and to publish details of these appointments each year in their Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report. As noted on page 14, Departmental Permanent Secretaries are also required to provide an annual assurance statement that all appointments have been managed by NICSHR resourcing teams, and that appointments made as Exceptions to Merit have been made in line with the requirements of the Recruitment Code. Exceptions to Merit may also be subject to audit by Commissioners as part of their Annual Audit Plan.

The number of appointments made by the NICS under each of the Exception to Merit categories for the last year is detailed in Table 2. These include appointments where approval to appoint was given by Commissioners. It should be noted that the information is presented by the NICS by calendar year (to align with the suite of reports on NICS human resource statistics which are produced annually by NISRA), whereas Commissioners' Annual Report relates to the period 1 April – 31 March.

Table 2: Appointments made by the NICS by way of Exception to Merit: January 2022 to 31 December 2024¹

Exception Category	Appointments 2022	Appointments 2023	Appointments 2024
Secondment	33	15	35
Transfer from another civil service of the Crown	0	1	0
Transfer of persons employed on functions being transferred	0	0	13
Exceptional needs of the NICS	0	1	1
Appointments made under Government initiatives/ programmes	50 ²³	29	0
Reinstatement	0	0	0
Total	83	46	49

Commissioners publish details of the appointments they give approval for in their own annual report each year. During 2024-25, following requests made by NICSHR on behalf of departments, Commissioners gave approval for appointments to be made under the following regulations:

- 1 This information is sourced from the Recruitment to the NICS Annual Reports 2022 – 2024.
- 2 15 paid work experience placements (six to nine months) were taken up by disabled young people under the JobStart scheme; permanent posts were subsequently identified for nine of these participants.
- 3 In 2022, Commissioners gave approval for a Civil Service Skills Academy pilot to be launched under Regulation 3 (e). The pilot was aimed at people with Level 5 or higher qualifications, who were unemployed, underemployed or seeking to retrain, and who, on successful completion of the Skills Academy, would be guaranteed a job interview at either Staff Officer or Deputy Principal grade for posts within DfE or TEO. The Academy focused on areas where skills gaps had been identified within DfE and TEO - project management, policy development and machinery of government/governance. 35 participants (18 SO and 17 DP) took up post in 2022 and 29 participants (14 SO and 15 DP) took up post in 2023.

Regulation 3(a) where the person is appointed on secondment

Commissioners gave approval for two secondments at SCS level, and four secondment extensions.

Below SCS, Commissioners gave approval for one secondment at Grade 6. They also approved four secondment extensions – two at Grade 6, one at Grade 7 and one at Staff Officer.

Regulation 3(d) where the person to be appointed is of proven distinction and exceptional reasons relating to the business needs of the Civil Service provide justification for the appointment.

Commissioners gave approval for three temporary appointments at SCS level and one at Grade 6.

In 2025, Commissioners received a number of requests to regularise appointments to the NICS under Regulation 3(d). These arose from departmental reviews of inward secondees and consultants which established that a number of individuals, appointed to departments from the Strategic Investment Board (SIB), were actually temporary civil servants appointed by Exception to Merit without the prior approval of Commissioners. These appointments did not therefore meet the requirements of the Recruitment Code.

Commissioners are supportive of departments attempting to regularise such appointments and of seeking their approval in accordance with the statutory requirements of their Recruitment Code. However, legal advice confirms that Commissioners would be acting ultra vires to grant approval for appointments retrospectively.

Although outside the period of this report, Commissioners subsequently gave approval for the hitherto unregulated appointments from the date on which the letter of approval was issued.

Commissioners also wrote to the HOCS and Permanent Secretaries to inform them that, while Commissioners are supportive of the ongoing regularisation of such posts, Exceptions to Merit appointments must receive Commissioners' prior approval before an appointment is made or extended (and that approval must be sought via the NICS Resourcing teams on a timely basis).

Commissioners met with the TEO Permanent Secretary in January 2025 to discuss the role of SIB. They hope that the ongoing Review of SIB will be completed in 2025-26 and that the recommendations within it will ensure that clear guidance is provided to departments on when individuals may be engaged via SIB as consultants and when they would be classed as temporary appointments to the NICS as an Exception to Merit.



NICS CODE OF ETHICS

Commissioners have a statutory role to hear appeals under the NICS Code of Ethics. Commissioners expect that a potential appellant will have exhausted the internal departmental procedures, that any ongoing investigation will be completed and the outcome known before they make a determination on whether a Code of Ethics concern will be accepted as an appeal for investigation.

The NICS is required to provide annually the number of concerns dealt with by departments under the Code of Ethics.

The NICS reported that, during the 2024 calendar year, 20 concerns were received and accepted under the NICS Code of Ethics, however three of these were subsequently investigated as fraud cases, rather than under the Code of Ethics. Of the remaining 17 concerns, one was partially upheld, eight were not upheld, five are ongoing, two were referred to NICS HR Employee Relations (one disciplinary case ongoing, one under consideration) and one was a local management issue which was resolved in the business area. Concerns raised included allegations of misuse of position and of departmental resources and allegations of inappropriate conduct and dishonesty.

During the 2024-25 reporting period, Commissioners received correspondence from one individual who wished to raise a concern under the NICS Code of Ethics. After initial consideration, Commissioners concluded the concern did not meet the eligibility criteria for acceptance as an appeal under the Code of Ethics.

The Civil Service Commissioners' **Guidance on Raising a Concern under the NICS Code of Ethics** sets out the eligibility criteria and the process that Commissioners will follow when considering appeals from existing Civil Servants.

NICS RECRUITMENT ACTIVITY

Article 4(5) of the Civil Service Commissioners (NI) Order 1999 and Appendix C of the Commissioners' Recruitment Code require the NICS to publish a wide range of information and statistical summaries in relation to recruitment to the NICS. These requirements are set out on page 13 of this report.

The NICS published its recruitment-related information for the calendar year of 2024⁴ in the **Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report 2024** and the **Analysis of NICS Recruitment Competitions 2024**.

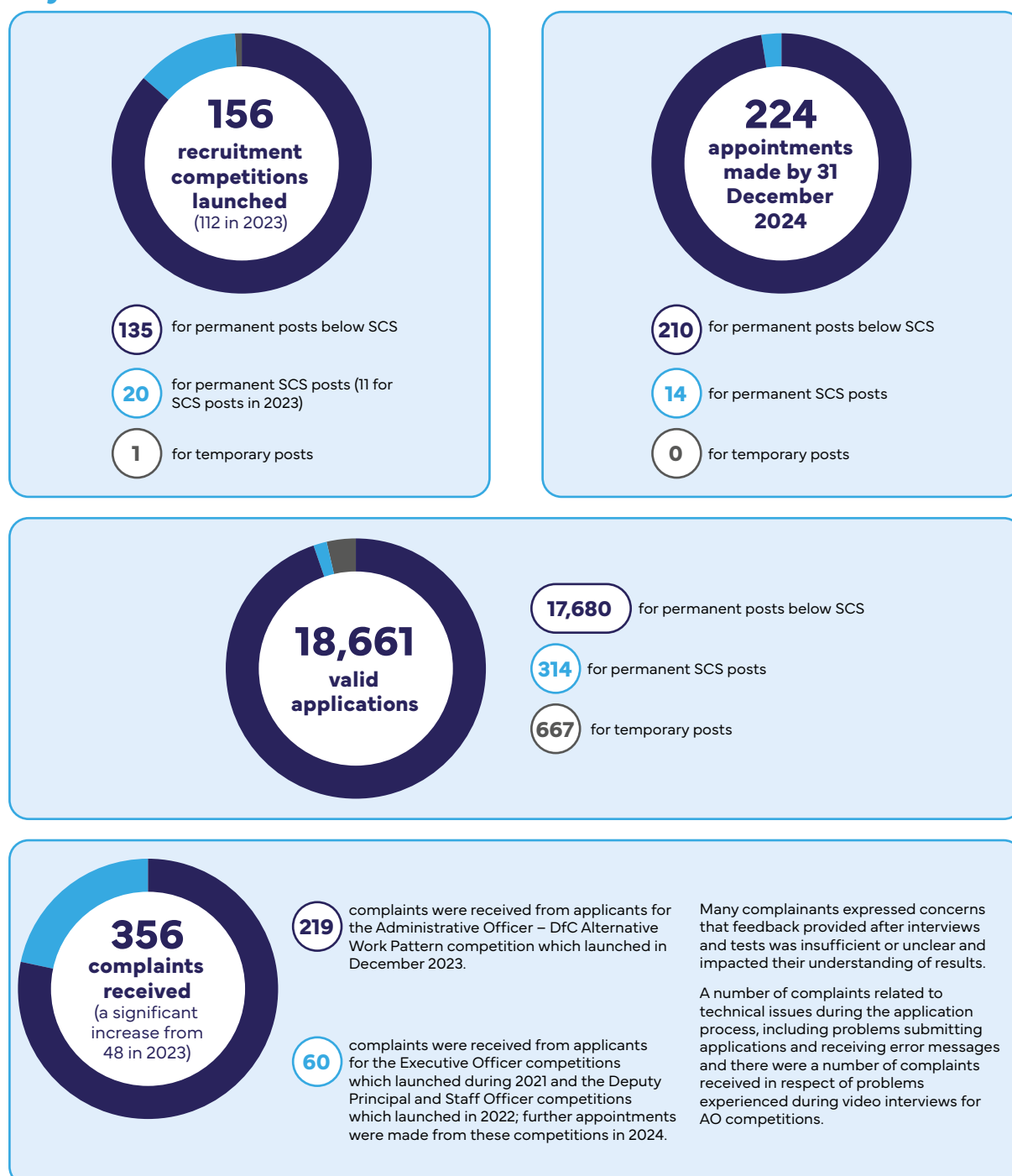
Each year Commissioners determine how the information published in these reports fulfils Article 4(5) of the Civil Service Commissioners (NI) Order 1999 as set out in Appendix C of the Recruitment Code.

4 NICS recruitment related data is reported on a calendar year basis in line with other NICS human resource statistics.

Recruitment Activity during 2024

The [Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report 2024](#) provides information on recruitment activity which took place during 2024, including appointments made by Exceptions to Merit and recruitment related assurances which are detailed elsewhere in Commissioners' Annual Report.

Key Facts:



Commissioners’ Recruitment Code requires a commitment to clear, meaningful and timely communication with candidates, including feedback. We have raised this with the NICS as an area we expect it to take action on and will be following up on this to see how it has been addressed. We are also undertaking a review of the pre-recorded interview process used for the AO competitions to determine if it met the requirements of the Recruitment Code, consider any steps the NICS has taken to enhance the end-user experience and, should findings support this, make recommendations to the NICS for improvement.

Internal Competitions

While Commissioners have no regulatory role in relation to internal competitions, we consider that it provides context and a helpful comparative perspective to publish this information alongside the open recruitment data. NICS internal recruitment competitions and appointment figures for 2022 to 2024 are therefore detailed in Table 3 below.

Table 3: NICS Internal Recruitment Competitions and Appointment Figures 2022 to 2024

Detail	2022	2023	2024
Internal Competitions	13	23	19
Internal Appointments	83	42	52

All of the 19 internal competitions held during 2024 were for posts below SCS. Commissioners continue to encourage the NICS to address diversity issues within the NICS through open competition wherever possible.

The stated aspiration of the NICS is to move towards external recruitment and selection as a default position for the SCS and Commissioners are pleased that all SCS competitions in 2024 were external recruitment competitions.

Agency Workers

Commissioners have noted the steady increase in the percentage of workers in the NICS who are agency workers as compared to NICS employees. The number of agency workers reported in the [Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report 2024](#), as at 31 December 2024, was 4,409.

This compares to 3,662 at 31 December 2023 (an approximate 20% increase) and 2,982 at 31 December 2022.

The NICS has reported that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which absorbs the cost of agency workers who carry out work on their behalf, account for approximately 45% of all agency workers in the NICS. It has also reported that a combination of factors over several years has resulted in an increase in the use of agency workers, such as: a temporary pause on the recruitment of permanent staff; the need to meet DWP targets; ongoing pressures from EU Exit, particularly the Windsor Framework requirements; and a number of reprioritisation exercises due to the budgetary situation.

Commissioners accept that the use of agency workers is a cost effective and necessary way to manage some time bound and project based work and to provide maximum flexibility to support the business needs of the NICS and its departments. However, we would like

to see more people being appointed as NICS staff, with the associated security of employment that provides, and numbers of agency workers reducing. We have raised our concerns about the proportion of agency workers in relation to the number of NICS employees with the DoF Permanent Secretary and have been assured that the NICS is taking forward a number of actions to improve the workforce position in the NICS and reduce the percentage of agency workers.

Key Developments and Initiatives during 2024

Commissioners meet regularly with the NICS to discuss key issues related to recruitment and selection and to keep abreast of developments within the NICS. Further detail on this can be found in Commissioners' Engagement with the NICS on pages 35 – 37. Key developments and initiatives in relation to recruitment and selection have been published in the [Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report 2024](#) including:

- ▶ Participation in Phase 2 of the JobStart Scheme, offering 26 participants under the Specialist Pathways groups (i.e. groups including young disabled people, those not in education, employment or training (NEET), care experienced, those engaged with the criminal justice system, and those at risk of falling into paramilitary activity or coercive control) nine month paid placements in the NICS commencing between April and July 2024.
- ▶ Commissioners provided approval under Exception to Merit Regulation 3(e) to allow participants who successfully complete their placement and achieve positive line manager assessment to be offered a permanent appointment by way of exception to the Merit Principle.
- ▶ Fifteen participants had taken up appointment by 31 March 2025 (with a further two scheduled to take up post on 1 April 2025 and a third participant to commence permanent employment with another public sector employer).
- ▶ The Department for Infrastructure launched a Trainee Civil Engineer Skills Academy in July 2024, offering full-time and part-time pathways for 48 participants. Participants received an Introduction to Civil Engineering and were able to learn and develop skills and knowledge across surveying, construction, traffic management, health & safety, personal development, teamwork and collaboration, communication and IT essentials. They were also provided with pre-recruitment training by Belfast Metropolitan College and the DfI Training Centre. Upon successful completion, participants were guaranteed an interview for a permanent post in the NICS as a Trainee Civil Engineering Assistant, providing a pathway to a career in civil engineering. Training was completed by the end of November 2024, with the NICS reporting that of the 48 places available, 17 full-time participants took up post in December 2024 and that part-time participants would be appointed in January 2025.

- ▶ A new approach to candidate assessment was piloted during the Permanent Secretary recruitment competition in 2024. In addition to psychometric testing and an interview with an independent occupational psychologist, a staff engagement exercise, where short-listed candidates were observed interacting with a group of NICS staff from a range of grades and departments was introduced as part of the selection process. This was designed to provide additional insights into each candidate. Post competition evaluation feedback highlighted that the candidates enjoyed and valued the opportunity to engage beyond the formal interview process and for external candidates it proved an opportunity to get a better feel for the NICS. The panel welcomed the additional insight into each candidate which highlighted areas to be explored further at interview and provided additional information to support their decision-making.

In 2024 the NICS also started the development of its new five-year People Strategy through three phases: discovery (research and benchmarking), design (consultation and engagement) and delivery (agreement on the final strategy).

Commissioners look forward to working closely with the NICS on recruitment and selection matters and, importantly, on the streamlining of recruitment. We are also pleased that, following the development of a prioritised HR Policy Renewal Plan, the NICS Recruitment Policy and Procedures Manual is a key policy area identified for review and is currently under development to ensure that it reflects best practice and is clear, concise and easily accessible.

The NICS has also reported significant diversity and inclusion activity under the three pillars of focus set out in its Diversity Action Plan 2024-25:

- (i) Embedding equality, diversity and inclusion across the Service by deepening knowledge and understanding of diversity and inclusion;
- (ii) Health and wellbeing to promote physical and mental health and wellbeing, raise awareness and understanding of issues and the support available with the launch of a new Health and Wellbeing Framework; and
- (iii) Employability skills and opportunities to those furthest removed from the labour market, alongside a programme of outreach to showcase the work the NICS does.

Commissioners are very supportive of the diversity and inclusion activity which is undertaken to attract, recruit and retain a NICS workforce which reflects the diversity of the people it serves. Dedicated effort must continue to be invested in promoting the NICS brand and encouraging under-represented groups to consider a career in the NICS.

A significant number of work placements were facilitated during the year for students in schools, further education colleges and universities as well as those not in education. Six apprenticeship competitions were also launched with 40 appointments accepted by 31 December 2024.

Statistical Summaries of Recruitment Competitions

The [Analysis of NICS Recruitment Competitions 2024](#) is an Official Statistics publication, published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). It presents statistical summaries, in a format which has been agreed with Commissioners, of all recruitment competitions which **closed to further activity in 2024** (i.e. no further appointments will be made from the competition) by the equality categories of sex, community background, ethnicity, disability, age group and sexual orientation. It also presents a summary by employment history (current NICS employee, previous NICS employee or no NICS employment history).

In 2024, 115 permanent recruitment competitions closed to further activity, having attracted 24,840 valid applications. 3,166 appointments were made from these competitions (over a five year period).

The competition which attracted the highest volume of applicants was for Administrative Officer (15,007 valid applications). A Grade 6 Accountant competition attracted no applicants.

10 of the 115 permanent competitions which closed to further activity in 2024 were for Senior Civil Service jobs, attracting 212 valid applications. 16 appointments were made from these competitions.

One competition also closed for temporary posts (548 valid applications) from which 83 appointments were made.

Data is presented in the [Analysis of NICS Recruitment Competitions 2024](#) for all applicants in relation to the categories noted above for the stages of the competitions – eligible applicants, invited to interview, passed interview and appointed.

Comparison for each equality category is also provided with the economically active population aged 16-64, using data from the 2021 Census.

The [Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report 2024](#) provides useful summaries of the NISRA data in collated form – Appendix 2, Table 1 (page 58) provides a summary of eligible applicants by Equality Group for competitions which closed to activity during 2024 broken down by Non SCS Permanent Jobs, SCS Permanent Jobs and Temporary Jobs. Appendix 2, Table 2 (page 59) provides a summary of eligible applicants, invited to interview, passed interview and appointed by Equality Group for competitions closed to activity during 2024.

COMMISSIONERS' ENGAGEMENT

Commissioners value the opportunity to develop and foster effective relationships with stakeholders as this facilitates the mutual sharing of experience, expertise, innovation and best practice.

In addition to Commissioners' links to the Head of the Civil Service and the NICS Permanent Secretaries, Commissioners also work closely with their counterparts in other jurisdictions to explore issues of mutual interest.

Engagement with the NICS

Commissioners continued to work closely with the NICS on a day to day basis, for example, in the processing of requests for approval to make appointments by Exception to Merit; chairing SCS recruitment competitions; the delivery of their audit function; and diversity and inclusion.

HOCS and Permanent Secretaries

During 2024-25, Commissioners had the privilege of working with the HOCS and the NICS Board in the pursuit of transformation of recruitment and selection.

Commissioners, along with counterparts from the UK Civil Service Commission, met with the HOCS, Non Executive Members of the NICS Board and the NIO Permanent Secretary on 18 September 2024 as part of a programme of events designed to share knowledge and experience.

Commissioners attended the Permanent Secretaries Stocktake Meeting on 28 February 2025, chaired by the HOCS. Discussion included:

- ▶ Programme for Government – Implications for Recruitment
- ▶ Update on NICS People Plan (2024-25) and NICS People Strategy (2025-30)
- ▶ Consultation on Commissioners' Strategic Plan (2025-29)

Commissioners also engaged in consultation with Permanent Secretaries individually over a period of weeks to discuss their views on current challenges and the need for transformation in recruitment and selection; and to explore how Commissioners might best take forward Priorities 2 and 3 of their Strategic Plan (see page 9).

They met with:

- ▶ the Department of Finance Permanent Secretary in September 2024 and February 2025 to discuss Recruitment and Selection related matters including:-
 - Grade 6/7 Trawl
 - Use of agency workers
- ▶ The Executive Office Permanent Secretary in January 2025 to discuss the role of the Strategic Investment Board (SIB)

NICSHR and People & OD - Recruitment and Selection Development Group (RSDG)

Commissioners collaborated on policy development with colleagues in NICSHR and People & OD, predominantly via the Recruitment and Selection Development Group (RSDG) but also through separate engagement and correspondence, as appropriate.

The RSDG, originally set up to address recommendations arising from a range of reports including the NIAO Report on Capacity and Capability in the NICS (2020), has evolved into a useful forum for engagement on policy measures associated with recruitment and selection. It met on three occasions in 2024-25.

During the course of the year, the RSDG focused on:



Progress on
the People Plan
(2024-25)



NICS People
Strategy
(2025-30)



Pilot SCS Recruitment
and Selection
Methodology



HR Policy



Jobstart Scheme
(Phase 2)



Temporary
Promotions



Sift Mechanisms
and Read Across
conventions



Pilot Skills
Academy
(Industrial Skills)



Secondments
from SIB



Transfer of Civil
Servants across
jurisdictions



Use of Success
Profiles



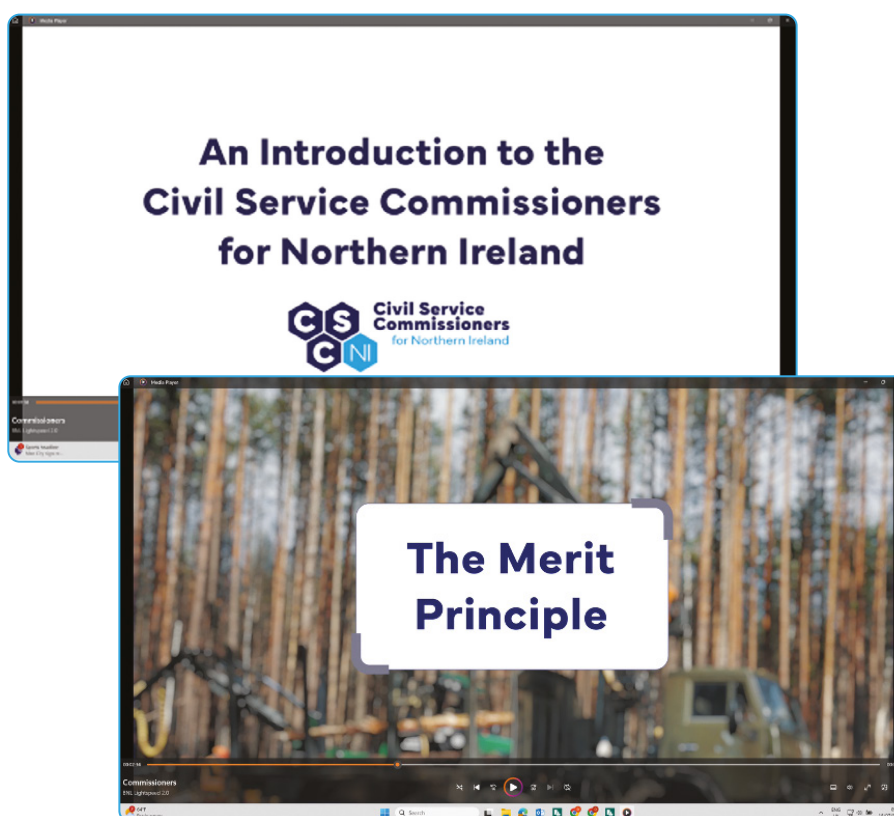
Video Interviews

In January 2025, Commissioners met with NICSHR's Head of HR Litigation Unit and received an overview of recruitment related cases and tribunals, particularly those concerning requests for reasonable adjustments.

Commissioners also served on NICS Task and Finish Groups on:-

- ▶ Reasonable adjustments (Dr Lesley Carroll)
- ▶ Recruitment and Selection Training (Sinéad Burns)

Commissioners produced an "explainer" video for inclusion in the NICS' in-house Recruitment and Selection training package. The 7-minute video describes Commissioners' regulatory role in recruitment and selection and explains what their Recruitment Code means for civil servants serving on recruitment panels.



Engagement with the UK Civil Service Commission

Commissioners were delighted to welcome First Commissioner, Baroness Gisela Stuart and Chief Executive, Kate Owen, to Belfast on 18 September 2024.



The day's programme of events began early with a breakfast meeting at Stormont Castle hosted by Dr Jayne Brady, HOCS, and attended by Laura McKeaveney and Frances Ruane, Non Executive Members of the NICS Board, and Julie Harrison, NIO Permanent Secretary.

Topics of discussion included:

- ▶ The Draft Programme for Government.

- ▶ The People Plan (One Year) and People Strategy (5 Year) which includes a talent management framework.
- ▶ NICS Board activity and the work of its Sub-Groups on Capital Projects, People (which includes contributors from the UK and Irish governments) and Reform/Transformation.
- ▶ Recruitment – the changing attitude to work and employment; the need for innovation in recruitment methods; effective on-boarding; embedding capability and agility; managing change and empowering people; future skills needs; and the importance of learning from each other.



This was followed by a presentation from Commissioners on their statutory role in a Northern Ireland context and debate on a range of live issues. People and OD and NICSHR were invited to showcase recent initiatives and provide an overview of their work.

The Secretariat continues to engage regularly with the UK Civil Service Commission on an informal basis to discuss matters of mutual interest. Commissioners look forward to a reciprocal visit to London in 2025.



Engagement with Cabinet Office's Government People Group

Commissioners engaged with the Recruitment Lead of the Government People Group to find out more about their use of Executive Search facilities, their in-house direct sourcing team and their Executive Search Playbook.

PROMOTING DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND EQUALITY

Commissioners consider diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity to be central to the Merit Principle and, accordingly, they are embedded within Commissioners' Recruitment Principles. Commissioners' Equality Scheme and Equality Action Plan 2022-2027 sets out how their statutory obligations will be fulfilled to promote equality and good relations. In addition, their Disability Action Plan 2022-27 shows how Commissioners aim to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people and encourage participation by disabled people in public life.

In February 2025, Commissioners engaged with Chief Commissioner, Geraldine McGahey, and Donal Collins of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and received updates on the transposition of EU Directives into domestic legislation and a progress report on the 'Good Jobs' Employment Rights Bill being processed through the NI Assembly.

Discussion focused on NICS initiatives and strategies to improve access to employment by particular Section 75 categories and on the equality statistics used in workforce metrics.

Learning and Development

In 2024-25, Commissioners focused on the following areas:

LGBTQ+

In May 2024, Commissioners and their Secretariat hosted an LGBTQ+ workshop attended by colleagues in People & OD and by Andrew Liggins and Jennifer O'Neill, representing the NICS' LGBTQ+ Staff Network.

Jennifer and Andrew presented on the aims, ethos and work of the Network which provides valuable support to LGBTQ+ employees and training for colleagues and allies. Services provided include reverse mentoring, where junior staff mentor senior colleagues on, for example, the appropriate use of language and inclusive spaces.

The Network also acts as a critical friend to policymakers.

Commissioners were delighted to welcome key speaker, Liz Skelcher, Stonewall NI who presented on gender identity, misgendering, microaggressions and the use of inclusive language in recruitment and selection. She highlighted the importance of recruitment panels understanding the concerns and lived experience of LGBTQ+ people applying for jobs and the need for safe and inclusive working environments.

Gender

In January 2025, Commissioners met with Fiona McCandless, the NICS Gender Champion, and Roseann Kelly from Women in Business NI.

Discussion topics included gender bias and stereotypes; the steady reversal

of women's under-representation in senior leadership roles but continued under-representation in the labour market generally; childcare; menopause; sexual abuse and violence; and hybrid working.



Commissioners meet with NICS Gender Champion and Women in Business NI

VOYPIC

In October 2024, Commissioners, their Secretariat, and a senior official from the NICS, met with young people and support workers from Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) to better understand the barriers to employment and challenges faced in the workplace by young people coming from a care background. Commissioners found the meeting with VOYPIC inspiring and thoughtful and it was helpful to hear the different views, experiences

and attitudes of the young people in relation to employment generally and the NI Civil Service in particular.

In addition to the above, Commissioners and the Secretariat have participated in a range of training initiatives throughout the year, including Managing Neurodiversity in the Workplace, and attended events including the Diversity Mark Summit in October 2024.

Diversity Mark

Commissioners have a statutory duty to ensure that appointments to the NICS are made on merit, on the basis of fair and open competition. Diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity are central to the Merit Principle.

In demonstration of Commissioners' corporate commitment to diversity and inclusion, Deirdre Toner, Chairperson, signed the Diversity Mark Charter on behalf of Commissioners and the Secretariat in December 2023 with a view to seeking Diversity Mark accreditation by December 2024.

Commissioners and the Secretariat were delighted that the Office of the Civil Service Commissioners NI achieved Diversity Mark Accreditation in November 2024, in recognition of their commitment to advancing diversity and inclusion and fostering a culture of respect where everyone feels welcome, their contribution is valued and they can fulfil their potential. We will develop a diversity and inclusion strategy (2025-29) and action plan (2025-26) which will aim to broaden the appeal of our organisation to a diverse range of applicants and, in particular, with a view to improving the gender balance of the organisation.



**Diversity Mark
Accredited**



COMMISSIONERS IN POST SINCE APRIL 2024

DEIRDRE TONER **CHAIRPERSON**

Throughout my career I have always believed that one of the most important obligations is to ensure that talented people, from a diverse community, have the opportunity to fulfil their potential in a wide range of employment, irrespective of, for example, age, ethnicity, religion, gender or disability. It is vital that recruitment to the NICS is as accessible as possible to the people it serves, creating impartial recruitment and selection to support the long-term structural, economic and societal challenges facing the organisation – in a time of uncertainty and transformation, this is more important than ever before.

As a Civil Service Commissioner, I have the privilege of interviewing some of the brightest and best candidates and I am regularly energised and inspired by their passion and enthusiasm for making a difference to society and by how their skills and ideas can improve the delivery of public services. I strongly believe that by applying the Merit Principle the best person for the position will be appointed.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service is a great place to work, with a huge range of roles and opportunities which can provide the most rewarding career experience.



**Deirdre was appointed
on 01 June 2018 for a
five year period and
extended for a further
five years, until
May 2028**

SINÉAD BURNS **COMMISSIONER**

Objective, open, fair and transparent recruitment is essential to maintaining and building public trust in appointments to the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS). It is imperative that on the basis of merit alone, the best and most talented people are appointed to the NICS. I also passionately believe that any public service should reflect the society it serves, in all of its diversity.

The Civil Service offers a full spectrum of incredibly exciting work opportunities, which will improve the lives of people across our community. Indeed, the work of NICS touches and impacts upon the lives of every single person here. I am honoured therefore to play a part in helping to ensuring the best available talent is appointed to these critically important roles.



**Sinéad was appointed
on 08 March 2016 for
a five year period and
extended for a further
five years, until
March 2026**

DR LESLEY CARROLL
COMMISSIONER

I have always believed in a professional, non-partisan public service where advancement is based solely on merit. As the NICS serves the whole community of people in NI it is important that it reflects the diversity of that community. The core function of the Civil Service Commissioners, to ensure that all appointments are made on merit, based on fair and open competition, is critical to providing assurance not only to those who work within the NICS but also to wider society.

Historically, the Civil Service Commissioners have sought to encourage and support diversity and inclusion initiatives. I am pleased to work within and carry forward that history. My role in recruitment is an opportunity to exercise my commitment to fairness and diversity. The diversity of opportunity within the Civil Service is something to be cherished and it should be reflected by a diverse workforce. Diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity are all central to the Merit Principle and embedded within Commissioners' Recruitment Principles.



Dr Lesley Carroll was appointed on 01 July 2022 for a period of five years, with her appointment due to end in June 2027

COMMISSIONERS' SECRETARIAT AND RESOURCES 2024-25

Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland are funded and sponsored by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO).

While Commissioners are afforded the independence to discharge their statutory functions with impartiality, Commissioners' work aligns with the Secretary of State's vision to make Northern Ireland **"a better place to live, work and invest"**.

Commissioners and the Secretariat work with the NIO in accordance with a framework document agreed by both parties. The purpose of the framework document is to ensure that the Commissioners and their Secretariat operate under and comply with good governance arrangements and practice, and applicable regulatory requirements and expectations.

The NIO oversees the Secretariat's performance and sets its annual budget. The Secretary has responsibility for ensuring all financial management decisions are made in accordance with HM Treasury Guidance on **Managing Public Money**.

In order to ensure compliance with their responsibilities the Secretariat regularly engaged with the NIO on matters such as governance and policy, financial management and budget forecasting.

During the year, there was a turnover in staff with some secondments ending and others beginning anew.

As a result, staff numbers varied for a number of months and ultimately the final number of staff to assist Commissioners with their duties, in 2024-25, comprised 4 members of staff, 1 part-time and 3 full-time, making up a complement of 3.8 FTE.

Commissioners met with the NIO Permanent Secretary (June 2024) to discuss their role and responsibilities; the scope for enhancement within the statutory framework; and the benefits of having a fourth Commissioner from the perspectives of managing workload, building resilience and promoting diversity of thought.

(These themes were developed over the remainder of the year, with a workshop arranged for early 2025-26 and the position of Commissioner advertised in March 2025).

Civil Service Commissioners and their Secretariat will continue to collaborate and pursue innovative methods to support the high quality and delivery of Commissioners' statutory functions whilst maintaining strong governance and adhering to best practice.

In 2024-25, Commissioners had a budget of £341,314. At year end, expenditure was under budget by approximately £40,230.

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Feedback

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Whilst this Report is a document of record it is important that it is also relevant and informative to the public. Should you have any comments regarding any aspect of the Report (e.g. content, layout etc.) the Civil Service Commissioners would be happy to receive them. Any such comments should be sent to the following address:

Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland

7th Floor
Erskine House
20-32 Chichester Street
Belfast BT1 4GF

Alternatively, please email the Commissioners at: info@nicscommissioners.org