



**Civil Service
Commissioners**
for Northern Ireland



ANNUAL REPORT 2025-26

**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 2025 to 31 March 2026

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Deirdre Toner
Chairperson

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Sinéad Burns

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Dr Lesley Carroll

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David MacAnulty

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Don Leeson



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CHAIRPERSON'S REVIEW

I am delighted to present this Annual Report on behalf of Civil Service Commissioners for NI and, in so doing, to reflect on the year that has passed.

I wish to thank my fellow Commissioners, Sinéad Burns and Dr Lesley Carroll, for their continued dedication, support and assistance during 2025-26.

It was an exciting year during which, in October 2025, we were delighted to welcome on board two new Commissioners – Don Leeson and David MacAnulty. Their appointments brought additional skills and experience to the team, and inadvertently also helped us achieve an improved gender balance.

Sadly, towards the end of the year we said goodbye to Sinéad Burns whose term as a Commissioner ended on 7 March 2026 after a period of 10 years. I wish to extend my personal thanks to Sinéad for her hard work and dedication – we will undoubtedly miss her wealth of knowledge and experience, as well as her perspicacious insights and sound judgement – we wish her all the very best in her future pursuits.

My thanks also go to the Secretariat for delivering effective and efficient support services throughout the year despite staff changes and limited resources.

I would like to thank Heather Caulfield, whose secondment ended in January 2026, for her dedicated service and support; her rigorous audit work; and for bringing perspective and common sense to the role.

Commissioners, as always, wish to pay tribute to the NICS for their continued efforts to provide high quality public services and welcome the implementation of its People Strategy 2025-30 which focuses on workforce skills and capability; experience and environment; and leadership and inclusion, through a range of key initiatives.

Commissioners have enjoyed productive engagement with the NICS, and in particular with NICSHR and People & Organisational Development (P&OD), on work to simplify and streamline the recruitment process, one of the Strategy's key initiatives. We are delighted to have been directly involved in the Streamlining Recruitment task and finish group and in pilot recruitment exercises aimed at improving recruitment and selection in the NICS.

Notably, Commissioners were delighted to support the implementation of an innovative new approach to managing AO (entry level) volume competitions which reduced the end-to-end recruitment time from 18 months to 12 weeks. Furthermore, I was personally privileged to chair the recruitment competition to appoint four Permanent Secretaries. This competition trialled new recruitment methods to try to attract the best candidates and ensure a fair selection process. I would like to thank the outgoing Permanent Secretaries (Colum Boyle, Denis McMahon and Ronnie Armour) for their distinguished contribution to the NICS and for their support to Commissioners. Equally I would like to welcome incoming Permanent Secretaries (Grainia Long, Emer Morelli, David Malcolm and Moira Doherty) and also Louise Crilly, who was recently appointed as Departmental Solicitor. We wish you every success and look forward to working with you all.

With each passing year, I am struck by the relentless pace of change which means that Commissioners, like everyone else, need to be agile, informed and stay ahead of the curve without losing sight of their core purpose. In 2025-26 Commissioners reviewed their Strategic Plan for 2025-29, added to their core values and agreed new Strategic Priorities to reflect that, while they are regulators appointed to uphold the Merit Principle in recruitment and selection to the NICS, their unique perspective and acquired skills could be better utilised and their style could

be more collaborative and supportive. Further on in this Report, you can read more about how Commissioners lived their new core values and delivered their role in line with their strategic priorities in 2025-26.

Commissioners are committed to supporting all NICS departments, within the scope of our remit, to ensure that the NICS attracts and appoints on merit, through fair and open competition, the best and most diverse people for the right jobs at the right time. Never has this been more crucial as public service budgets are tight, unemployment is low, some skills are in short supply and Northern Ireland has a shrinking working age population. Technological progress and the use of Artificial Intelligence create opportunities but also present challenges, particularly in relation to recruitment and selection.

As we move into 2026-27, and despite local challenges and global uncertainty, Commissioners are looking forward to consolidating positive and meaningful relationships with the NICS and other stakeholders, continuing to engage and exchange ideas and good practice with our counterparts in other jurisdictions and delivering our statutory duty to uphold the Merit Principle, while always maintaining our independence.



DEIRDRE TONER
CHAIRPERSON

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 managers 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 uphold the core values of the Civil Service, namely integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality. Commissioners 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 on merit. This principle, known as the Merit Principle, is the basis of fair and open competition. Commissioners regulate how appointments should be made to the NICS. This applies at all grades.

In order to uphold the Merit Principle, Commissioners set out in their **Strategic Plan 2020-25** that they will safeguard an impartial and independent Northern Ireland Civil Service by maintaining the principle of selection on merit. 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 recruitment;
- ▶ 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 the **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**.



COMMISSIONERS REVIEW THEIR ROLE

In 2025-26, Commissioners identified an opportunity to better use their unique perspective, insights and expertise to, not just regulate recruitment and selection in the NICS, but support and assist the NICS to promote external recruitment, attract talented and diverse people, innovate and simplify processes, improve recruitment panel training and ensure that all appointments are made in accordance with their Recruitment Code.

Throughout the year Commissioners:

- ▶ Engaged with NICS Departments, predominantly at Permanent Secretary level, on **how** Commissioners deliver their statutory functions and **what** added value they could bring to the NICS in their role as a regulator;
- ▶ Reflected on **how** they discharge their regulatory role and whether there was scope within legislation and policy to be more collaborative;
- ▶ Researched how other similar Commissions in the UK, Canada and New Zealand delivered their functions;
- ▶ Considered the views of reputable think tanks on public sector recruitment in the UK;
- ▶ Adopted a fresh, outward-looking approach and agreed a **Strategic Plan 2025-29** with new core values and four new strategic priorities.

Strategic Plan 2025-29

Core Values:

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



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; and



Priority 4: Develop a diverse and supportive internal culture with an ethos of good governance.

Strategic Planning Workshop

To explore how they could effectively deliver on their new priorities, Commissioners held a strategic workshop on 30 April 2025, facilitated by the Department of Finance's (DoF) Innovation and Consultancy Services (ICS), with participation from all Commissioners and the Secretariat.

The rationale behind the workshop, as defined by Commissioners, was as follows:

1. Commissioners were keen to support the broader transformation of the NICS within the limits of their legislative authority or, if appropriate and practicable, within an extended remit.
2. In addition, the NIAO Report on Capacity and Capability in the NICS (published in 2020) recommended that "the NICS and the Civil Service Commissioners should work in partnership, taking account of how other models operate, to explore how they can best support the delivery of the transformation agenda and the changes needed to reform the recruitment and selection process throughout the NICS."

3. Commissioners' **Strategic Plan 2025-29** marks a new approach by Commissioners to how they fulfil their role – rather than simply fulfilling their statutory obligations, they are keen to collaborate and support the NICS, where possible, to deliver the best public services.

The workshop allowed Commissioners to:

- ▶ Engage in "blue sky thinking" with a purpose;
- ▶ Explore options for developing their role and achieve their strategic priorities, particularly priorities 2 and 3 above;
- ▶ Explore how they could make the best of existing opportunities; create new opportunities; collaborate with others; and
- ▶ Identify what, if any, measures would be required (e.g. a legislative/policy amendment) to develop the options further.

The workshop led to the identification of a number of potential outputs and actions, however, some were ruled out due to the constraints of Commissioners' legislative authority or external policy. Commissioners agreed to focus on:

- ▶ Enhancing their hard influence;
- ▶ Proactively exercising their "soft influence" by building trusted relationships, providing a challenge/critical friend role, where appropriate, to promote good recruitment practice;
- ▶ Raising the profile of their role, providing stronger advisory guidance on Recruitment Code compliance and increasing public confidence that appointments to the NICS are made on merit, on the basis of fair and open competition.

Agreed Actions

The following actions were agreed and incorporated into short and long term Business Plans:-

- ▶ Have regular meetings with the Head of the Civil Service (HOCS) and departmental Permanent Secretaries;
- ▶ Reach out to other SCS grades via suitable platforms;
- ▶ Host a public Webinar on what to expect from the SCS Recruitment process
 - Hold focus groups with existing civil servants (Grades 5, 6 and 7) to inform content and delivery;
- ▶ Enhance social media profile;
- ▶ Seek to participate in Recruitment and Selection Training;

- ▶ Consider the value of having Link Commissioners; and
- ▶ Capitalise on Diversity Mark accreditation.

Within this reporting period, Commissioners held five focus groups on four dates in February 2026 with 17 civil servants across eight departments to learn about:

- ▶ Experiences and impressions of the SCS recruitment process;
- ▶ What candidates know about the role of Commissioners and their Recruitment Code in the context of recruitment to the NICS generally, and to the SCS in particular;

- ▶ What would be useful for prospective candidates or existing SCS employees to hear about in a Webinar; and
- ▶ What would attract prospective internal and external candidates to register to attend.

Commissioners would like to thank all those who took part for their valued contribution.

Commissioners intend to deliver their first Webinar in September 2026.



COMMISSIONERS' STATUTORY AUDIT FUNCTION AND COMMISSIONERS' AUDIT PLAN 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; and
- ▶ 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:

- (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;

- (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 [NICS Recruitment Annual Report 2025](#) and the [Analysis of NICS Recruitment Competitions 2025 | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#) reports.

Evidence-based Assurance Framework

Commissioners require the 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 2025; 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, except for one, made to Department for Communities (DfC) during 2025.

Commissioners' Audit Plan 2024-25

There were two audit recommendations relating to the Review of NICS Appointments below SCS made under Regulation 3(a) of the 2007 General Regulations outstanding from last year's report as follows:

Recommendation 1: Engage with Departmental Boards on the requirements of the NICS Secondment Policy and Secondment Guidance.

Recommendation 2: 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.

Recommendation 1 was completed, with People and OD having written to all Permanent Secretaries about the policy requirements for secondments, emphasising the need to consult NICS HR before arranging them. Additionally, Departments were reminded of the requirement to provide a list of appointments made under Regulation 3 of Commissioners' General Regulations 2007 as part of the Permanent Secretary Assurance Statement. NICS HR will use this list to verify and document appointments, ensuring compliance with policies.

Recommendation 2 remains open, awaiting the NICS's ongoing review of the Secondment Policy. Commissioners look forward to receiving and commenting on the draft policy and supporting guidance in due course and this recommendation will be followed up and reported on in the 2026-27 Annual Report.

Commissioners' Audit Plan 2025-26

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 2025-26 the following audits were carried out:

Audit of Competitions below SCS 2025-26

In accordance with their statutory duty, Commissioners decided to undertake, as part of their audit plan for 2025-26, an audit of six competitions below SCS. Competitions for audit were selected from a list of all relevant competitions provided by NICS HR, within the parameters set by Commissioners. The purpose of the audit was to examine the application of the Recruitment Code to ensure that the selection process used in the competitions and the manner in which it was deployed in practice was 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 requirements of the Recruitment Code; and
- b. Bring to the attention of Commissioners and NICSHR any evidence indicating that policies, procedures or practices are insufficient to meet the requirements of the Code.

Commissioners found that for the majority of competitions, and in most stages of the recruitment process, the principles in the Recruitment Code were applied, and the processes and procedures observed were consistent with upholding the Merit Principle.

For example:

- ▶ Candidate information, in the form of advertisements and candidate information booklets, was detailed, providing candidates with good information not just on the job itself, but on the department, the terms and conditions and the selection process;
- ▶ Applications were sifted based on advertised criteria only;

- ▶ Candidate assessment booklets were well completed. Candidates were asked competency-based questions which related to the advertised competencies;
- ▶ Interview mark frames and merit lists were correctly prepared; and
- ▶ Reasonable adjustments were accommodated throughout the recruitment process.

Commissioners provided feedback and made recommendations to the NICS on areas where improvements could be made. These included:

Recommendation 1: The NICS should ensure that those providing panels with HR advice are aware of the policy in relation to a review of sift decisions; that competition leads are kept updated on all issues which affect their competition; that panels record justifications for all decisions they make following a review; and that, where candidates are readmitted to a competition, they are given an explanation for this.

Recommendation 2: All panel members should be involved in any review of a sift decision and in significant panel decisions, as is set out in policy, to ensure the integrity of the process.

Recommendation 3: The NICS must ensure that all panel members are appropriately trained and that evidence is held of this.

Recommendation 4: The NICS should consider how panels can be supported to target and make jobs more attractive to under-represented groups. For example, consideration should be given to the options for job-share and/or part-time working and to circulating vacancies to representative groups and organisations. A record should be kept of discussion and actions taken in relation to the range of diversity and inclusion considerations in respect of the whole competition design and outreach.

Recommendation 5: The NICS should consider a policy which advertises full-time/part-time or other flexible working by default and requires justification for exceptions to this policy (e.g. for full-time only).

Recommendation 6: The NICS should ensure there is open, accountable and transparent communication on the use of references in the Candidate Information Booklet, which is supported by the information in the application form.

Recommendation 7: The NICS should review the procedures for ensuring that all key documentation is in place and has been checked and retained.

NICSHR have advised that they will develop an action plan to address these recommendations and Commissioners will monitor progress.

Audit of pre-recorded interview process for Department for Communities and NICS AO competitions

Following written and verbal communication received by Commissioners from applicants, via media reports and Assembly Questions, and in accordance with their statutory duty, Commissioners undertook as part of their Audit Plan for 2025-26 an audit of the use of the pre-recorded interview for:

- ▶ the Administrative Officer (AO) Alternative Working Pattern, DfC competition (IRC298527) and
- ▶ the Administrative Officer (AO) competition (IRC303169)

The purpose of the audit was to examine the operation of the pre-recorded interview stage (delivered via HireVue) to determine if it met the requirements of the Recruitment Code. Accordingly, the objectives of the audit were to:

- a. Provide Commissioners with sufficient information to enable them to reach a determination on whether or not the pre-recorded interview met the requirements of the Recruitment Code;

- b. Consider any steps the NICS has taken to enhance the end-user experience; and
- c. Should findings support this, to make recommendations to the NICS for improvement.

The audit concluded that there was insufficient evidence to find non-compliance with the Recruitment Code.

Positively, the review found that the process for online interviews could be adapted to accommodate reasonable adjustments for candidates with a disability.

The review included sampling of videos from one competition. Videos for the other competition were not available to review as the contract with Hirevue expired.

Commissioners found that there were a significant number of candidates invited to complete a pre-recorded interview but either failed to do so or were not assessed due to their interview being incomplete. Accordingly, Commissioners agreed with the NICS conclusion that the pre-recorded interview process had not proved to be the best assessment tool for these competitions.

In addition, Commissioners considered that the experience of some candidates is likely to have undermined general confidence in the NICS recruitment processes. Commissioners advised the NICS to seek to fully understand the experience of all candidates in order to inform the future use of online assessment tools. They made a number of observations and invited the NICS to consider:

- ▶ Determining why there was such a high 'did not attend' rate in these competitions and consider what steps could be taken to mitigate against this;
- ▶ Analysing Section 75 data, where it is available, to establish whether any particular groups were disproportionately represented in the 'incomplete interviews' or 'did not attend' categories;
- ▶ Ensuring that any technology used is supported by all operating systems, including mobile phones, that recordings will not be interrupted by 'notifications' and that, where Wi-Fi has dropped out on candidates, there is a process to enable them to restart the recording;

- ▶ Separating the ID verification process from the interview itself. This would remove the potential for any unconscious bias where panel members may derive information, such as nationality, from sight of a passport which indicates Section 75 characteristics (religious belief or political opinion);
- ▶ Ensuring that candidates cannot proceed to record their interview until a video and audio check has been successfully completed;
- ▶ Having a dedicated telephone line open during the interview window for candidates who may have any issues and that calls are answered by a person who can investigate the issue and has authority to make decisions;
- ▶ Ensuring that any panel training on conduct includes the requirement to consider if candidates are reading questions or prompts on screen;
- ▶ If pre-recorded interviews are to be used again, ensuring that suitable retention and disposal periods are applied to the information gathered, from a legal and contractual perspective; and
- ▶ Where issues have arisen in competitions which are attracting significant complaints or correspondence from MLAs, flagging these to Commissioners.

Commissioners' Article 6 Approval Process

During 2025-26 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 23 - 25.

Has the Recruitment Code been observed?

Commissioners' 2025-26 Audit & Review Opinion

Having examined the range of evidence gathered throughout 2025-26, 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 2025-26 Commissioners became aware of several individuals appointed to Departments by way of Exceptions to Merit, as laid out in Commissioners' General Regulations 2007, without Commissioners' approval. These are referred to in more detail on pages 26 - 32.

Commissioners' Audit Plan 2026-27

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 2026-27 Commissioners' audit and review will cover:

- ▶ Audit of Merit Lists; and
- ▶ Audit of Competitions below SCS (six competitions).



SCS 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. Commissioners discharge their statutory duty to maintain the principle of selection on merit, on the basis of fair and open competition, by 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 33 appointments. These are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1:

Appointments approved from Senior Civil Service Competitions during 2025-26

POST	LEAD NICS DEPARTMENT
Senior Assistant Director for the Public Prosecution Service, Grade 3	Public Prosecution Services (PPS)
Operational Delivery, Child Maintenance Service & Universal Credit, Grade 5	Department for Communities
Food & Farming Group Deputy Secretary, Grade 5	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA)
NISRA Director of Analysis (x4), Grade 3	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)
Director of Road Asset Development & Director of Major Projects (x3)	Department for Infrastructure
Director of Financial Shared Services, Grade 5	Department of Finance
Head of Legal Services – Departmental Solicitor's Office	Department of Finance
Finance Director (x2), Grade 5	Department for Communities
Director of Governance and Corporate Services, Grade 5	Department of Justice
Director of Machinery of Government (x2), Grade 5	Department for Communities
Director of Rivers Operations, Grade 5	Department for Infrastructure
Commissioner of Valuation, LPS, Grade 5	Department of Finance

POST	LEAD NICS DEPARTMENT
Director of Social Security Policy and Legislation Decision Making Services, Grade 5	Department for Communities
Director of Resourcing & Director of HR Transformation, Service Management & Strategic Engagement (x2), Grade 5	Department of Finance
Director of Digital & Data Services, Grade 5	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA)
Digital, Security & Information Services, Grade 5	Department for Communities
Assistant Director of Public Prosecutions, Grade 5	Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland
Director of PRONI, Grade 5	Department for Communities
First Legislative Counsel	The Executive Office
Head of North South Ministerial Council, Grade 5	The Executive Office
Director of CAFRE, Grade 5	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA)
Integr8 Programme Director, Grade 5	Department of Finance
Permanent Secretary (x3)	Department for Communities Department of Education Department for Infrastructure

APPOINTMENTS MADE BY WAY OF EXCEPTIONS TO MERIT

Commissioners acknowledge that there are circumstances where appointments made by exception 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; | Service provide justification for the appointment; |
| b. where the person to be appointed holds a situation in another Civil Service of the Crown; | e. where the person has been selected for an appointment under Government programmes or initiatives; and |
| 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; | 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). |
| d. where the person to be appointed is of proven distinction and exceptional reasons relating to the business needs of the Civil | |

Further details on these exceptions are provided in the 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 NICS departments to make certain appointments by Exception to Merit. Departments must adhere to the specific guidance in the Recruitment Code in relation to each exception. Commissioners' written approval is required for the following:

- ▶ SCS appointments (all regulations)
- ▶ Extension of secondments beyond 3 years (Regulation 3(a))
- ▶ Appointments under Regulation 3(d); and
- ▶ Government schemes or initiatives under Regulation 3(e) and any requests to make appointments permanent following completion of a temporary scheme or initiatives.

Commissioners consider requests for appointments to be made by way of exception to the Merit Principle on a case-by-case basis. All requests must be submitted via NICS HR/People & OD. Each department is responsible for clearly setting out for Commissioners why it is not reasonably practicable to make the appointment in accordance with the Merit Principle, justifying the exception to merit approach, in order that Commissioners may be satisfied that an appointment by exception is

warranted. Commissioners will seek further information to aid their decision-making process if appropriate.

Commissioners require NICS HR 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 16, departmental Permanent Secretaries are also required to provide an Annual Assurance Statement that all appointments have been managed by NICS HR 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: 1 January to 31 December 2025¹

Exception Category	Appointments 2023	Appointments 2024	Appointments 2025
Secondment	15	35	34
Transfer from another civil service of the Crown	1	0	0
Transfer of persons employed on functions being transferred	0	13	0
Exceptional needs of the NICS	1	1	2
Appointments made under Government initiatives/programmes	29	0	17 ²
Reinstatement	0	0	0
Total	46	49	53

Commissioners also publish details of the appointments for which they have given their approval in their own Annual Report, as laid out below.

During 2025-26, following requests made by NICSHR and People & OD on behalf of departments, Commissioners gave approval for appointments to be made under the following regulations:

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

- ▶ Three secondments to posts at SCS level;
- ▶ One post to be filled in principle at SCS;

- ▶ Three secondment extensions at SCS level;
- ▶ Four extensions to secondments below SCS; and
- ▶ One consecutive secondment below SCS.

There were no requests to make appointments under regulation 3(b) or 3(c).

¹ This information is sourced from the Recruitment to the NICS Annual Reports 2023-2025

² 17 individuals were appointed to the NICS following participation in the Job Start Scheme

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

- ▶ One temporary appointment at SCS level;
- ▶ One temporary appointment below SCS;
- ▶ Two extensions to temporary appointments at SCS;
- ▶ One extension to a temporary appointment below SCS.

Regulation 3(e) where the person has been selected for an appointment under Government programmes or initiatives

Commissioners gave approval for the launch of a Government programme aimed at providing temporary employment across NICS departments for up to 20 young people from a care background, with the option to make them permanent employees.

Regularisation

In 2024-25, 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. The reviews established that some of those roles were filled by temporary civil servants, appointed to departments from the Strategic Investment Board (SIB), using Exception to Merit **without** the prior approval of Commissioners. These appointments did not therefore meet the requirements of the Recruitment Code.

In their 2024-25 Annual Report, Commissioners reported that legal advice had confirmed that Commissioners would be acting ultra vires to grant approval for appointments retrospectively. At that

time, Commissioners were supportive of departments attempting to regularise such appointments and of seeking their approval in accordance with the statutory requirements of their Recruitment Code. Therefore, within the 2024-25 reporting period, Commissioners gave approval for six hitherto unregulated appointments. Given that they may not grant retrospective approval, approval applied only from the date on which the letter of approval was issued.

This series of events led to Commissioners discussing this issue with the HOCS and DoF Permanent Secretary and formally writing to the HOCS and Permanent Secretaries (on 10 April 2025) informing 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 commended the department (DfC) that had commenced a process of regularisation and called on other departments to do likewise, where appropriate, and as soon as possible.

Having met The Executive Office (TEO) Permanent Secretary at the beginning of 2025 to discuss the role of SIB, Commissioners further met with the Chief Executive of SIB in July 2025 when they again discussed the role of both SIB and of Commissioners and explained the requirement, as detailed in their Recruitment Code, whereby temporary appointments can only be made to the Senior Civil Service under Exceptions to Merit regulations with Commissioners' prior written approval, including where individuals are seconded from SIB.

SIB later provided Commissioners with a list of those from SIB who were currently deployed in the NICS. These records only partially matched those held by NICS HR and only partially reflected Commissioners' records of approvals given.

During these meetings, Commissioners also referred to the ongoing Review

of SIB which was to be completed in 2025-26 and expressed the hope that the recommendations within it would 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. Commissioners would value the publication of the Review and its recommendations, together with formal guidance on the definition of 'consultants', to establish if they will address issues of concern.

Within the reporting year but some 11 months hence from Commissioners' letter to HOCS and Permanent Secretaries, the Department of Justice (DoJ), in March 2026, sought to regularise an appointment at SCS grade for a post related to a cross-Executive programme that is hosted by the DoJ. While Commissioners welcome the approach in principle, and approved the secondment from 31 March 2026, they are concerned that the incumbent has been in post without the required approval for an extended period of time. However, this raises a question for Permanent Secretaries with regard to the value of the Assurance Statements provided annually to the DoF Permanent Secretary and, subsequently, to Commissioners. These Assurance Statements form a core part of the evidence that Commissioners seek in order to establish that recruitment is monitored and that systems are

in place to ensure that selection for appointment to the NICS is made in accordance with the Recruitment Code.

Commissioners encourage SIB and NICS departments to work collaboratively and with focus alongside NICSHR to ensure that all appointments to the NICS are made through fair and

open competition or by Exception to Merit, where appropriate, with the necessary approvals. Commissioners would urge departments, where such appointments have already been made to seek, via NICSHR, to regularise those posts or fill them on a permanent basis through fair and open competition.

Non-Compliance with the Recruitment Code

In 2025-26, there were five identified cases of non-compliance with the Recruitment Code which arose from

failure to seek Commissioners' approval under Exception to Merit Regulations before appointments were made:

Grade	Department	Non-Compliance details
Grade 3	Department of Health	Regulation 3a - Extension to Secondment not sought in a timely manner resulting in incumbent in post for 6-week period without approval
Grade 5	Department for Communities	Regulation 3a - Extension to Secondment not sought in a timely manner resulting in incumbent in post for a 10-day period without approval
SCS	Department of Health	Regulation 3d – person in post from August 2025 - November 2025 without approval
SCS	Department of Justice	Regulations 3a ³ – person in post from August 2020 - March 2026 without approval
Grade 7	Department of Education	Regulation 3a – Consecutive secondment without approval

Commissioners wish to highlight that requests for appointments or extensions to appointments to be made by Exceptions to Merit must be submitted to Commissioners for consideration, along with a robust

Business Case, in a timely manner, whereby Commissioners have ample time to carefully monitor, scrutinise and respond to a request **before** a person is appointed or has received an indication that they will be appointed.

3 The department did not consider the individual to be on secondment for a significant proportion of this time period.

It is unacceptable to notify Commissioners **after** a post is filled in this way and departments cannot assume that, in such circumstances, approval will be granted. Individual departments are responsible for liaising with NICSHR to manage vacancies and to ensure that, where an appointment is to be made by Exception to Merit, the Recruitment Code is adhered to and its requirements met.

Commissioners encourage NICS departments to prioritise consideration of the resources and skills they need to achieve their objectives and to effectively plan to fill posts on an external by default basis, as far as possible, ensuring that the right people are in the right posts at the right time. Effective planning may obviate the need to make appointments by Exception to Merit and ensure that the use of Exceptions to Merit is rare⁴.

Commissioners acknowledge that the NICS Secondment Policy and procedural guidance is currently being reviewed to strengthen governance and ensure that the necessary approvals are obtained. They look forward to the publication of guidance on the 'Use of Professional Services including Consultants' which is also being developed and which should complement the NICS Secondment Policy.

They further acknowledge that NICSHR has been engaging with the Strategic Investment Board and departmental Permanent Secretaries to remind them of their obligations and of the processes to be followed in making Exception to Merit appointments.

Commissioners intend to conduct an awareness raising exercise across NICS departments in 2026-27 to highlight the importance of adhering to the Recruitment Code in relation to appointments made by Exception to Merit to positions in the NICS.

4 Paragraph A.13 of Commissioners' Recruitment Code v.16

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 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.

NICS is required to provide on an annual basis the number of concerns dealt with by departments under the Code of Ethics.

NICS reported that during the 2025 calendar year, 24 concerns were received under the NICS Code of Ethics across five NICS departments, however, one of these was subsequently investigated as a fraud case, rather than under the Code of Ethics.

Of the 23 concerns accepted:

- ▶ Consideration of eight concerns remained ongoing at year end;
- ▶ Two resulted in disciplinary investigations with warnings issued;
- ▶ One was investigated and recommendations were made;
- ▶ One was referred under the Special Adviser Code of Ethics;
- ▶ One was closed due to insufficient information;
- ▶ Two concerns were addressed by other relevant organisations; and
- ▶ Eight were closed as there were no findings to support the allegations or no evidence of wrongdoing.

Concerns raised included inappropriate actions of staff and allegations of misuse of departmental resources. One related to NICS participation in Belfast Pride and consideration was ongoing at year end.

During the 2025-26 reporting period, Commissioners also received correspondence from one individual who wished to raise a concern under the NICS Code of Ethics in relation to the Belfast Pride Parade 2025. After initial consideration, Commissioners referred the individual back to their department for further consideration of the concern, ensuring that the individual had been given the benefit of all available levels of escalation.

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

NICS RECRUITMENT ACTIVITY

NICS Recruitment Activity

Article 4(5) of the Civil Service Commissioners (NI) Order 1999 and Appendix C of the Commissioners' Recruitment Code requires 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 pages 35 – 37 of this report.

The NICS published its recruitment-related information for the calendar year of 2025⁵ in the [**NICS Recruitment Annual Report 2025**](#) and the [**Analysis of NICS Recruitment Competitions 2025 | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency**](#).

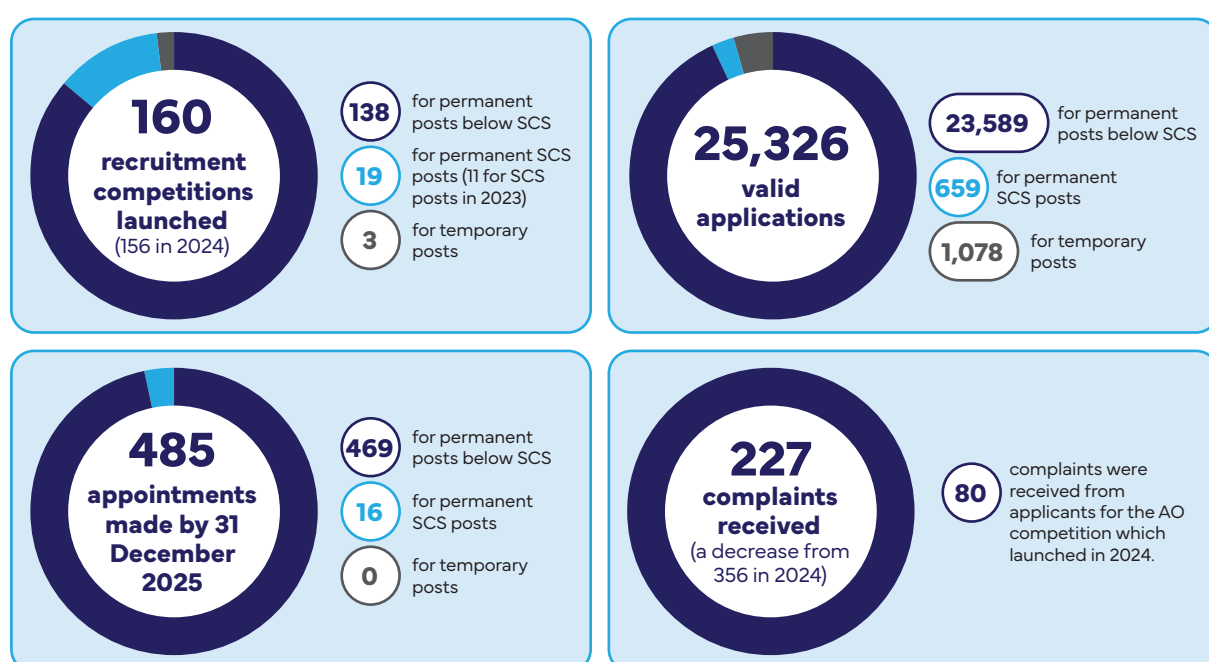
Each year Commissioners determine how the information published in these reports fulfils Article 4(5) of the Civil Service Commissioners (NI) Order 1999 as set out in Appendix C of the Recruitment Code.

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

Recruitment Activity during 2025

The [NICS Recruitment Annual Report 2025](#) provides information on recruitment activity which took place during 2025, including appointments made by Exceptions to Merit and recruitment related assurances which are detailed elsewhere in Commissioners' Annual Report.

Key Facts:



The nature of complaints received related to delays in issuing results; technical issues during online interviews; and appeals from applicants who had been rejected from the process on the basis that the panel considered them to be reading from notes during online interviews. Other complaints related to the sift and interview feedback provided, which some applicants considered was not sufficiently meaningful. Some applicants believed that they had performed better and requested their interview marks to be reviewed.

Complaints were managed in accordance with the complaints procedure for externally advertised competitions.

Lessons learned from complaint investigations were, as appropriate, shared with the third-party HR service provider, HR Connect and/or the Resourcing team in NICS HR and the People and OD function.

Commissioners undertook an audit during 2025 of the pre-recorded interview used for the AO competitions and made observations to the NICS to inform future use.

Internal Competitions

While Commissioners have no regulatory role in relation to internal competitions, they 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 2023 to 2025 are therefore detailed in **Table 3** below.

Table 3: NICS Internal Recruitment Competitions and Appointment Figures 2023 to 2025

Detail	2023	2024	2025
Internal Competitions	23	19	37
Internal Appointments	42	52	110

36 of the 37 internal competitions held during 2025 were for posts below SCS. One internal competition was held at SCS level during 2025 in the Department of Education.

Commissioners continue to encourage the NICS to address diversity issues 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 but one of the SCS recruitment competitions were externally advertised.

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 [NICS Recruitment Annual Report 2025](#), as at 31 December 2025 was 5,296. This compares to 4,409 at 31 December 2024 (an approximate 20% increase).

The NICS has reported that of the 5,296 agency workers recorded in December 2025, 2,517 were recorded in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), accounting for approximately 48% 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, including the Windsor Framework requirements, and a number of reprioritisation exercises due to the budgetary situation. The NICS is managing a range of recruitment competitions with the aim of creating a supply of permanent staff to assist departments to reduce the volume of agency workers in the NICS.

Commissioners 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. During 2025-26, Commissioners again raised 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 actions to reduce the percentage of agency workers. The DoF Permanent Secretary added, however, that until the NICS recruits a sufficient supply to meet the NICS' resourcing demands, temporary agency workers will continue to be a necessary part of the NICS workforce profile, to deliver vital public services, DWP initiatives and Programme for Government objectives.

Commissioners accept that on some occasions the use of agency workers is a cost effective and necessary way to manage timebound projects and provide maximum flexibility to support the business needs of the Civil Service and its departments.

Key Developments and Initiatives during 2025

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 42-44. Key developments and initiatives in relation to recruitment and selection, have been published in the [NICS Recruitment Annual Report 2025](#) notably:

- ▶ The NICS successfully piloted a streamlined AO recruitment competition in the North West region, delivering a significantly reduced end-to-end recruitment timeframe of approximately 12 weeks from launch to appointment. It is anticipated that this approach will be deployed for some recruitment competitions during 2026.
- ▶ The NICS built on its successful participation in Phase 2 of the JobStart Scheme with 17 young people at risk of long-term unemployment successfully completing their placements and, following assessment, received permanent appointments within the NICS between January and April 2025. Commissioners provided approval under Exception to Merit Regulation 3(e), to allow participants who successfully completed their placement and who achieved a positive line manager assessment to be offered a permanent appointment.
- ▶ In addition, in September 2025, Commissioners provided approval for the NICS to participate in Phase 3 of the JobStart Scheme employability programme, to include all working-age benefit claimants who are unemployed or economically inactive, and 21 applicants are due to commence a nine-month placement in early 2026.



The NICS People Strategy 2025-2030 was launched in April 2025, setting out the long-term direction for building a Civil Service that is capable of delivering sustainable public service reform and improved outcomes for citizens. The strategy is structured around three core priorities of Skills and Capacity, Experience and Environment, and Leadership and Inclusion. Commissioners worked closely with the NICS on recruitment and selection matters and, importantly, on the streamlining of recruitment. They look forward to seeing progress in strategic workforce planning, the development of the Job Families Framework and the introduction of the Integr8 system to modernise and integrate NICS Finance and HR services.

The NICS continues to commit to creating an inclusive workplace culture where everyone can fully participate, perform at their best and reach their potential. Work during 2025 has included:

- (i) Development of actions to enable NICS participation in Job Start Phase 3 to offer paid work placements to those furthest removed from the labour market;
- (ii) Delivery of a staff network event, as part of National Inclusion Week 2025, to recognise and celebrate the critical role staff networks play in helping create a more inclusive workplace culture;

- (iii) Establishing formal cross departmental forums to explore and identify improvements in terms of the NICS offering of support for Women's Health and Mental Health; and
- (iv) Contributing to the development of public disability strategies including the Autism Strategy Delivery Plan, the Disability Strategy and Disability at Work Strategy.

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.

Commissioners note that in October 2025 the Operational Delivery Apprenticeship Scheme was launched to fill approximately 200 apprenticeship roles across NICS, providing opportunities to earn, learn and develop professionally. Six apprenticeship competitions were launched in 2025, with 38 appointments made by 31 December 2025.

Statistical Summaries of Recruitment Competitions

The [Analysis of NICS Recruitment Competitions 2025 | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#) 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 2025 (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 2025, 139 permanent recruitment competitions closed to further activity, having attracted 33,477 valid applications. 4,073 appointments were made from these competitions (over a six year period). The competition which attracted the highest volume of applicants was for Executive Officer I (11,013 valid applicants).

15 of the 139 permanent competitions which closed to further activity in 2025 were for Senior Civil Service jobs, attracting 328 valid applications. 23 appointments were made from these competitions.

One competition also closed for temporary posts (582 valid applications) from which 97 appointments were made.

Data is presented in the [Analysis of NICS Recruitment Competitions 2025 | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#) 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 with the economically active population, aged 16-64, is also provided for each equality category, using data from the 2021 census.

The [NICS Recruitment Annual Report 2025](#) provides useful summaries of the NISRA data in collated form – Appendix 2, Table 1 (page 61) provides a summary of eligible applicants by Equality Group for competitions which closed to activity during 2025 broken down by Non SCS Permanent Jobs, SCS Permanent Jobs and Temporary Jobs. Appendix 2, Table 2 (page 62) provides a summary of eligible applicants, invited to interview, passed interview and appointed by Equality Group for competitions closed to activity during 2025.



COMMISSIONERS' ENGAGEMENT

Commissioners value the opportunity to develop and foster effective relationships with:

- ▶ Stakeholders;
- ▶ Counterparts in other jurisdictions;
- ▶ Recruitment and selection practitioners in other sectors

to keep up to date on recruitment and selection developments and to share experiences, expertise, innovation and best practice.

Engagement with the NICS

Commissioners 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 the audit function; diversity and inclusion; and Code of Ethics concerns.

Head of the Civil Service (HOCS) and Permanent Secretaries

Commissioners commenced a consultation exercise with Permanent Secretaries in 2024-25 and continued the series of discussions into 2025-26, meeting with Ian Snowden (DfE), Ronnie Armour (DE) and Mike Farrar (DoH). The purpose of the consultation was to present Commissioners' Strategic Plan for 2025-29; to explore Permanent Secretaries' departmental recruitment needs and skills requirements; and to identify opportunities for Commissioners to support the NICS in the context of their regulatory role, while maintaining their independence.

Commissioners held a post-consultation plenary meeting with Dr Jayne Brady, HOCS, along with NICSHR and People & OD on 19 June 2025.

In addition, Commissioners wrote to HOCS and Permanent Secretaries (April 2025) reminding them about the requirements for making appointments to posts by way of Exceptions to Merit and the process for doing so. They offered departments the opportunity to regularise any appointments which required Commissioners' approval but where they had inadvertently been made without approval and in breach of the requirements of the Recruitment Code. In doing so, they highlighted that Commissioners would be acting ultra vires to approve appointments retrospectively (*this is also covered in the section of this Report entitled 'Exceptions to the Merit Principle'*).

Commissioners met with the Permanent Secretary of The Executive Office in June 2025 to discuss the role of the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) and the Review of SIB which had still to be published.

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

The Recruitment and Selection Development Group, which had originally been set up in response to the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Audit Office's Report on Capacity and Capability in the NICS (November 2020) met on three occasions in 2025-26. This has evolved into a useful forum for engagement on policy measures associated with recruitment and selection.

The Terms of Reference for the group were reviewed and amended to reflect the changing focus and needs of all stakeholders and to ensure that engagement is effective and productive.

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

- ▶ NICS People Strategy 2025-2030 – Pipeline, Process, Performance
- ▶ Pilot SCS Recruitment and Selection Methodology
- ▶ HR Policy Renewal
- ▶ Integr8
- ▶ Review of NICS Workforce Model – Job Families
- ▶ Success Profiles (*as an alternative to NICS Competency Framework*)
- ▶ Employability Scheme for Care Leavers
- ▶ Jobstart Phase 3
- ▶ NIAO Report on Leading and Resourcing the NICS
- ▶ Talent Management and use of Merit Lists

NICSHR and People & OD – Operational

Commissioners met and corresponded on an ad hoc basis with NICSHR and People & OD on the following matters:-

- ▶ NIAO Review of the recommendations from the Report on Capacity and Capability in the NICS (2020) and the subsequent Report on Leadership and Resourcing in the NICS published on 27 January 2026
- ▶ Sift Improvements
- ▶ Pilot AO (NW) Competition
- ▶ Pilot AO (Belfast) Competition
- ▶ Exceptions to Merit – Regularisation of Appointments
- ▶ Amendments to NICS Code of Ethics and to Commissioners' Guidance on Raising a Concern under the NICS Code of Ethics

Head of HR Litigation Unit

Commissioners held their annual meeting with the Head of the (NICS)HR Litigation Unit on 4 December 2025 and received useful information and insights on recent recruitment related Industrial Tribunals and their outcomes.

The subjects of the tribunals included internal promotion, part-time working and job-share requests, nationality requirements (permanent staff and agency workers), timebound eligibility criteria and requests for reasonable adjustments.

Tribunal cases in other parts of the UK were also discussed. Commissioners learned of a scenario where positive action was deemed positive discrimination; the need for candidate transparency about their employment history; and a trade union class action case claiming age discrimination in volume competition testing methods.

Task and Finish Groups

Commissioners were pleased to contribute to the Streamlining Recruitment Task and Finish group and to comment on innovative plans to streamline and speed up end-to-end recruitment, while maintaining the principle of selection on merit, through fair and open competition.

Engagement with Counterpart Organisations



UK Civil Service Commission

Commissioners visited the UK Civil Service Commission at their offices in 1 Horse Guards Road, London, on 15 and 16 September 2025 and were welcomed by First Commissioner, Baroness Gisela Stuart and her Secretariat.

As well as sharing experiences with the First Commissioner, NI Commissioners met with counterparts, Paul Kernaghan, Martin Spencer, Liz Walmsley and Neil Wooding to discuss new initiatives, challenges and opportunities in the recruitment and selection space, including the challenges and opportunities presented by Artificial Intelligence.

They enjoyed presentations from the UK team on:



- ▶ Going Forward Into Employment – Schemes to appoint people from a care background and from the justice system;
- ▶ Policy development; and
- ▶ Audit Compliance

The OCSC Secretariat also engaged at various points in the year with the UK Commission's Secretariat on, inter alia:

- ▶ Retrospective approval (Exceptions to Merit)
- ▶ Ministerial involvement in Senior Civil Service Appointments, comparing the different approaches in UK and in NI.

Cabinet Office's Government People Group

During their visit to London, Commissioners met with Ajay Jagatia and Adam Wigley from the Government People Group and received a presentation on their Executive Search Facility and Playbook.

New Zealand Public Service Commission

On the evening of 6 August 2025, Commissioners and the Secretariat crossed time zones to meet online with senior officials from the New Zealand Public Service Commission who were responsible for Leadership Development, Recruitment and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. The Commission, while operating under very different operational and governance structures to those in Northern Ireland, is responsible for the appointment of Chief Executives to its 42 agencies, which employ a total of 64,000 public servants. Officials discussed different approaches to recruitment and shared insights into the importance of inclusive recruitment.



Commission for Public Service Appointments (CPSA) and Public Appointment Service (PAS), Ireland

Commissioners hosted Elaine Cassidy (Director General) and Emer Butler (Principal Officer) from the CPSA, along with Aoife Lyons (Senior Psychologist) from the PAS, at Erskine House, Belfast, on 26 February 2026.



**poistphoiblí
publicjobs**

An Coimisiún um Cheapacháin Seirbhíse Poiblí
Commission for Public Service Appointments

They discussed new developments and the changing recruitment landscape. Commissioners and the CPSA compared their respective responsibilities in relation to Exceptions to Merit and Excluding Orders; and Code of Ethics and Protected Disclosures. The PAS updated Commissioners on developments in PublicJobs.ie

To give our guests a more holistic view of developments in recruitment and selection in the NI Civil Service, Commissioners invited along representatives from People and OD and NICSHR.

People & OD presented an overview of work undertaken by the NICS to improve diversity in its workforce and support new entry routes into the NICS for under-represented groups.

NICSHR presented updates on:

- ▶ Delivery of the People Strategy and measures to improve Pipeline, Performance and Process in recruitment and selection; and
- ▶ Recruitment related complaints.

All present shared their views on the use of Artificial Intelligence both by organisations and by candidates in recruitment and selection and referred to current Cabinet Office guidance on AI. As AI becomes more advanced and a mainstream feature of recruitment, this will inevitably be the subject of much future engagement. Delegate contact details were exchanged to enable further collaboration between organisations.



Local Government Staff Commission

Commissioners met with Diana Stewart, Director of the Local Government Staff Commission, on 24 July 2025 and discussed recruitment methods used to make appointments to senior positions in Councils across NI and in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, based on the Local Government Competency Framework.

Engagement with Other Stakeholders

Steve Harper, Chief Executive, Strategic Investment Board (SIB)

On 24 July 2025, Commissioners met with Steve Harper, the recently appointed Chief Executive of SIB, to hear about his vision for the organisation and to introduce him to the work of Commissioners and the purpose of their Recruitment Code. This meeting was timely as SIB have a role in identifying and seconding people with relevant skills to fill certain temporary roles in the NICS. The meeting provided an opportunity for Commissioners to explain:

- ▶ that they were supportive of the use of Exceptions to Merit (listed in Commissioners' General Regulations 2007) where they were justified;
- ▶ their role in approving appointments to the NICS made by way of Exception to Merit; and
- ▶ the process for obtaining Commissioners' approval.

Northern Ireland Audit Office

Commissioners participated in a fieldwork meeting with NIAO in May 2025 on the Review of the recommendations from the Report on Capacity and Capability in the NICS (2020). The review resulted in the subsequent publication of the NIAO Report entitled "Leadership and Resourcing in the NICS" on 27 January 2026.

Recommendation 3.4 of the 2020 Report which read *"The NICS and the Civil Service Commissioners should work in partnership, taking account of how other models operate, to explore how they can best support the delivery of the transformation agenda and the changes needed to reform the recruitment and selection process throughout the NICS"* was marked as complete in the 2026 Report.

Engagement with Other Sectors

Microsoft

Commissioners met with HR professionals from Microsoft (Belfast Office) on 15 May 2025 on Recruitment and Selection in a large private sector organisation, exploring how Microsoft assesses and evaluates skills to meet the requirements of the roles available.

EPIC Futures

For more information, see later section on Promoting Diversity, Inclusion and Equality.

PROMOTING DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY

Commissioners recognise that an inclusive culture is built on continuous learning and believe that diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity are central to the Merit Principle. These values are embedded within Commissioners' Recruitment Principles, Equality Scheme and Disability Action Plan 2022-27.

Section 75 of the NI Act 1998 and Section 49a of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 – Statutory Equality Obligations

In line with their [Equality Scheme](#) 2022-27, Commissioners and the Secretariat delivered their 2025-26 Equality and [Disability Action Plan](#).

The OCSC submitted its Section 75 Annual Progress Report (2024-25) on Public Authority Statutory Equality and Good Relations Duties to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland in June 2025.

In 2025-26, Commissioners met with:

EPIC Futures

In May 2025, Commissioners and their Secretariat met with Professor Kristel Miller, Director of EPIC Futures, to better understand the barriers faced by those furthest from the labour market.

EPIC Futures brings together academia, policymakers, business, community and voluntary sector to tackle challenges unique to place. They aim to create evidence-based solutions to promote fair and inclusive employment across Northern Ireland.

Commissioners found the meeting with Kristel eye-opening; it provided a much clearer picture of the real-world hurdles that some candidates face and the steps that can be taken to make recruitment opportunities more accessible.



NICS

In February 2026, we held our annual Diversity and Inclusion meeting with People & OD.

People & OD referred to the People Strategy 2025-30 which, with the endorsement of Ministers and senior leaders, has diversity and inclusion at its core and demonstrates commitment to:

- ▶ Build and sustain a workforce that reflects the diversity of the people the NICS serves;
- ▶ Embed a culture of engagement, inclusion and belonging with visible leadership and with a shared responsibility across the Service; and
- ▶ Health and Wellbeing.

Commissioners and People & OD also discussed:

- ▶ The appointment of SCS diversity champions;
- ▶ The valuable work delivered by Staff Networks (gender, disability, LGBTQ+, race and ethnicity);
- ▶ HR Policy Renewal Programme; and
- ▶ Flexible working.

Commissioners commend the NICS for its ongoing diversity and inclusion work and welcome the launch of key Diversity and Inclusion related policies in 2025-26.



Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

In March 2026, Commissioners engaged with Chief Commissioner, Geraldine McGahey, and Louise Conlon, Chief Executive of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and discussed:

- ▶ The NICS Workforce Review;
- ▶ The need for legislative reform in Northern Ireland which serves to protect and strengthen the rights of all;
- ▶ Employment Rights Bill (UK) and Good Jobs Bill (NI);
- ▶ The ruling on For Women Scotland Ltd v Scottish Ministers and the awaited judgement on the appeal (to the Supreme Court) of a decision



to disapply primary legislation pursuant to Article 2(1) of the Windsor Framework – Dillon Case;

- ▶ Equality related complaints; and
- ▶ The use of AI and its potential for discrimination.

Learning and Development

During the course of the year, Commissioners and the Secretariat completed mandatory training on Equality and Diversity and attended a number of webinars and courses provided by the Equality Commission for NI, Diversity Mark and other organisations, covering subjects such as:

- ▶ Intersectionality;
- ▶ Cultural Competence in the Workplace;
- ▶ Inclusive employment for people with care system experience;
- ▶ Dyslexia awareness;
- ▶ Equality and artificial intelligence at work; and
- ▶ Hidden disabilities.

OCSC Applied for Diversity Mark Reaccreditation

The Office of the Civil Service Commissioners NI achieved Diversity Mark Accreditation in November 2024. This recognised our commitment to fostering a culture of respect where everyone feels welcome.

Building on this, we officially applied for Diversity Mark reaccreditation at

the beginning of 2026 and undertook to look beyond our internal diversity aspirations and incorporate diversity related objectives into Commissioners' audit and other work with the NICS.

As at the end of this reporting period, the OCSC awaits the outcome of its application.

COMMISSIONERS IN POST SINCE APRIL 2025

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 talented and skilled 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 1 June 2018 for a
five-year period and
extended for a further
five years, until
May 2028**

MRS 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 provide the opportunity to 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 8 March 2016 for a five-year period and extended for a further 5 years, until March 2026

DR LESLEY CARROLL
COMMISSIONER

The NICS plays a key role as a professional, non-partisan public service and as a Civil Service Commissioner I am privileged to support the NICS to recruit candidates through fair and open competition, based on merit. The Merit Principle maintains a standard of openness and fairness that is critical for the public service provided by the NICS.

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. I am also pleased to engage with the NICS to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of recruitment practice within the boundary of the Merit Principle.

I have been pleased to see initiatives to increase professionalism in recruitment, developing a civil service fit for the times in which we live, to enliven and enrich the service provided.

It is also a privilege to work alongside colleagues, Commissioners and Secretariat, to achieve the goals set by the Civil Service, playing my part in recruitment while offering encouragement and challenge as appropriate.



**Dr Lesley Carroll
was appointed on
1 July 2022 for a
period of five years**

DON LEESON

COMMISSIONER

The NICS is one of our most important institutions. As well as supporting our democratic system, it delivers critical public services and is one of Northern Ireland's largest employers. More than any other organisation, it is expected to demonstrate the highest standards of fairness, integrity and professionalism through the consistent application of the Merit Principle in recruitment.

Achieving this is not as straightforward as it may appear. It involves much more than advertising a vacancy and appointing the candidate who performs best at interview. Every stage of the recruitment process must be fair, transparent and equitable. This begins long before a vacancy is advertised. Areas of under-representation across the NICS, and the reasons behind them, must be understood. Barriers to participation must be identified and addressed. At the same time, vacancies must be filled efficiently while maintaining the integrity of the Merit Principle.

I have been privileged to witness first-hand the commitment of Commissioners and staff, and NICS officials, to upholding the Merit Principle and advancing diversity, equity and inclusion. I have also observed a willingness to learn from others and innovate to improve recruitment outcomes.

This work continues. Improving gender balance through more flexible working arrangements and making greater use of ring-fenced opportunities for disabled people, will further overcome barriers to inclusion.



**Don was appointed
on 1 October 2025 for
a period of five years**

DAVID MACANULTY
COMMISSIONER

Throughout my career I have been strongly committed to the principles of a professional, impartial and merit-based public service. I believe that public confidence in government depends on recruitment and appointment processes that are fair, transparent and demonstrably independent, and that these processes must reflect the diversity of the society they serve. Ensuring that opportunity is based solely on merit, while removing unnecessary barriers to participation, has been a consistent theme of my work across inspection and legal roles.

I have worked extensively in environments requiring independence of judgement, rigorous analysis and the confidence to provide constructive challenge at senior levels. I have overseen and scrutinised complex decision-making processes, assessed organisational compliance with statutory and ethical standards, and provided assurance on systems that operate under intense public and political scrutiny. This experience has reinforced my belief that strong governance, professional recruitment practices and adherence to the Merit Principle are essential to maintaining public trust and organisational legitimacy.

As a Commissioner, I seek to balance assurance with improvement—upholding standards while encouraging innovation, professionalism and accessibility. I am particularly committed to ensuring that recruitment systems are capable of attracting talented individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, equipped to meet the evolving challenges facing the public service. I value the opportunity to work collaboratively with colleagues, offering both support and challenge where appropriate, and to contribute positively to building a civil service that is resilient, inclusive and fit for the future.



**David was
appointed on 1
October 2025 for a
period of five years**

COMMISSIONERS' SECRETARIAT AND RESOURCES 2025-26

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

While Commissioners maintain the necessary independence to perform their statutory functions with full impartiality, their objectives remain aligned 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, guided by a mutually agreed framework document. This document serves 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 establishes its annual budget. The Secretary is responsible for ensuring all financial decisions align with HM Treasury Guidance on **Managing Public Money**.

To maintain compliance, the Secretariat engages regularly with the NIO on matters such as governance and policy, financial management and budget forecasting.

The Secretariat experienced a number of staff changes during the year as secondments came to an end, and consequently staffing levels fluctuated for some months. At the conclusion of the 2025-26 period, the Secretariat consisted of four members of staff, totaling 3.4 FTE.

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

In 2025-26, Commissioners had a budget of approximately £372,904. Expenditure was under budget by approximately £200.

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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:

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