

Perceptions and Attitudes to careers in the Northern Ireland Civil Service

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1. Background

In February 2013, the Northern Ireland Civil Service Commissioners and Corporate HR (CHR) commissioned Fujitsu to undertake a research project to assess perceptions and attitudes to careers within the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Senior Civil Service (SCS).

The research focused on factors that may impact or influence individuals decisions to apply for a new role or seek progression within the Senior Civil Service. This included areas such as motivations, experience of the recruitment/application process, employer brand and benefits package. To ensure that the research was current, it was agreed that the study would look only at competitions for the SCS in the last three years.

The research aimed to address the following questions:

- Does the NICS attract enough high calibre candidates to apply for senior positions compare to other similar organisations?
- Which types of senior roles and NICS organisations have the most difficulty in attracting a sufficiently high calibre applicant pool?
- Why is this? And what particular real or perceived barriers exist?
- What can be done to address these in the future?

2. Approach

A structured approach to undertaking the research was proposed by Fujitsu and accepted by the Commissioners and CHR. This involved the following strands of analysis:

- Interviews with past internal and external candidates to understand individual motivations and any patterns;
- Interviews with senior level individuals in external organisations (Public, Private and Voluntary) to understand senior level perspectives on employment with NICS;
- Interviews with HR representatives within other organisations, to understand the challenges experienced elsewhere in recruiting at a senior level;
- Analysis of NICS data, requested through the HRConnect Service;
- Review of external data and research sources to understand trends, environmental factors and any additional factors identified by those sources that may be relevant to this assignment.

Details of the activities undertaken within each strand of analysis are documented below.

2.1 Interviews

In total, 21 interviews were conducted and included:

1. 5 preparatory interviews with the Commissioners, to understand their opinions, experiences and concerns and to validate the detailed questionnaires to be used for other interviews.
2. 6 senior civil servants from different departments who were all recruited externally within the last 3 years. This was to understand their motivations for applying to the NICS and SCS, the recruitment process they went through and if there were any perceived barriers to joining the NICS/SCS.
3. Further interviews were then carried out with external organisations which included 3 from the private sector, 3 from the voluntary sector and 4 from different public organisations within Northern Ireland. The private sector interviews were held with senior HR representatives to help understand any recruitment challenges they may have faced and to gain a view of their senior recruitment volumes. The remaining interviews held with organisations in the voluntary sector and NI public sector were with senior level employees to understand their views and perceptions of the NICS and SCS.

2.2 HRConnect Data

HRConnect are the HR service for all Northern Ireland Civil Service departments and the Northern Ireland Office and have provided data in terms of the number of recruitment competitions held since April 2010 along with supplementary data including volumes of applications, hires and leavers within the same period. This data was analysed and used to highlight any key findings which would be of interest in relation to answering the key research questions, as detailed in Section 1. For example, to

determine the volume of internal and external candidates applying for roles and to understand if sufficient interest is being generated.

2.3 Industry Research

To support both the interviews and HRConnect data we also looked at some recent industry analysis provided by the CIPD around Resourcing in order to highlight any key points or market trends which may prove useful for this research. Pay benchmarking material provided by the NICS was also analysed and again used to highlight any significant areas which are relevant to this research.

3. Key Findings

3.1 Introduction

This section sets out the key findings and themes which have emerged from the research described in Section 2. We have structured the findings under some key theme headings where analysis has highlighted significant points in determining the responses to questions. The findings are structured under the following headings:

- Motivation
- Recruitment process
- Salary and Benefits
- Brand

Within each section, case study information from the external organisation interviews is highlighted in order to illustrate key points where appropriate.

3.2 Motivation

One of the key areas of interest to understand in relation to careers within the NICS was the motivation behind applying. This varied across the senior civil servants interviewed; however, one of the key points to note was that out of the 6 interviewed, 4 had had experience of acting in the role on secondment or of working with the NICS at ‘arms length’. This experience had therefore given them the opportunity to understand aspects of the role, the organisation and the overall work undertaken by employees of the NICS. In the cases of the secondments, interviewees reported that this had given them an excellent working knowledge of the work aspects and a real sense that they knew what they would be taking on in applying for the role.

The usefulness of secondment as a means of really understanding a role was similarly highlighted in the external interviews with Public Sector participants. Secondments were highlighted as an opportunity for NICS to also improve its brand image and attract good quality external candidates. one senior civil servant interviewed stated:

‘I would not have considered the NICS as an employer if it had not been for the secondment’.

The participant added this was due to the fact they did not realise the work the NICS and SCS did in relation to their current line of work.

Some interviewees from the senior civil service were motivated by the prospect of career progression, in particular when already working for another Public Sector organisation within which grade progression was limited. Participants also reported that a key motivation for applying was the prospect of career development and progression opportunities and this was in terms of the opportunity to progress upwards through the grade structure. To understand whether external senior level individuals would be motivated to apply for a role in NICS, we posed the question of those interviewees currently working in the Private, other Public and voluntary sectors. The rationale was to determine their high level perceptions of NICS as an employer. 2 of the 9 external

interviewees confirmed that they would not consider applying for a role with NICS; in one case, this was due to impending retirement and satisfaction with career progression in current organisation; in the other case, the participant had a very negative perception of the NICS, citing that NICS was:

'Bureaucratic, risk adverse, lacks; change, innovation and creativity'

Those who responded positively to the prospect of employment with the NICS highlighted that they would only apply if the role was interesting and offered progression.

3.3 Recruitment Process

From the research we conducted there were two key areas which emerged with regards the recruitment process. Firstly around the process itself and the steps individuals went through during the recruitment process and secondly the overall candidate experience. Both these areas will be discussed below.

3.3.1 Process

The interviews overall highlighted that recruitment processes differ substantially between various organisations, types of organisation and sectors. The SCS process was relatively standard across candidates experience and typically consisted of an online application form, a panel interview and a presentation exercise, set by the panel and which was prepared and delivered on the day. Two of the senior civil servants interviewed had undergone an assessment centre, although this was not standard and typically this process is not the norm for SCS roles. The following table sets out two example experiences and highlights the lack of standardisation in the current NICS approach.

Participant A	Participant B
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advert in Newspaper and word of mouth • Paper or online application form • Successful at Civil Servant Sift • Assessment centre: • Papers to write a policy document and action plan (6hrs to complete) • 30min presentation on the policy document written • Q&A from panel • Competency based interview • Successful and on the list waiting to be appointed (12 months) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word of mouth • Online application • Assessment Centre: • Group Exercise • Role Play • In tray exercise (4hrs to complete) • Competency interview with panel <p>NB: This assessment took place over two days.</p>

With the above findings in mind, we wanted to understand if a similar process applied also to other sectors and organisations. In general terms, many of the processes and process steps were similar and included application forms, interviews and presentations. For senior level posts, many of the other organisations were using psychometric testing supported by external experts as a way of better understanding candidate profiles and degree of fit to the target role. Particularly in the private sector, head hunters are being used to seek out and approach potentially suitable candidates. At the middle management level, assessment centres were seen as key in the recruitment process to identify the most suitable candidates. For specific technical and professional roles, specialist recruitment agencies were often used to help identify target individuals with the relevant deep skills and expertise. In relation to the research this is useful as the recruitment process in the private sector is the same for all senior candidates at a particular level to provide continuity whereas in the SCS two applicants underwent very different assessment centres which does not provide consistency or continuity. A more structured recruitment process is likely to have a more positive impact on the candidate and in turn a positive employer brand.

The public and voluntary sectors were similar to the NICS recruitment process however there is a shift to the use of some external expertise as highlighted by one voluntary and one public sector organisation. This was used during the interview stage however the public sector organisation only uses an independent consultant for director positions and they felt the use of external expertise helped the organisation get a better 'fit' of candidate for the role.

3.3.2 Candidate Experience

Whilst differing approaches may not per se be a negative factor in attracting and engaging the right candidates, overly onerous processes often are. In the above two cases, both candidates felt that the process was too onerous and cited length of end to end process duration and number of steps within the process as reasons why. One of the candidates commented:

'It was a long process to then be told I was on the waiting list and could take 12 months to be appointed'.

However, positive comments were made about the assessment centre experience with candidates citing activities and exercises as feeling like 'on the job' experiences and giving them some insight to what was expected in role.

Other senior civil servants who had experienced an application form, panel interview and presentation found the process to be appropriate in terms of the approach and steps involved. There was however, reference to timing issues particularly after interviews were held and candidates often had to wait 4-6 weeks to be told if successful which they felt was far too long. With sight of this, 2 of the senior civil servants who were external applicants highlighted they were looking for other opportunities whilst waiting to hear from NICS. This highlights the potential risk to the NICS of losing good candidates during that elongated process. As part of clarifying the NICS data, we did request data on how many candidates applied for roles in the first instance versus those that pulled out during the recruitment process but were unable to obtain this information from HR Connect within the timescales of the exercise. It may be useful in the future for the NICS to confirm this data to understand how many candidates may be lost during the recruitment process as a result of finding roles elsewhere/becoming disillusioned with the long recruitment process timescales. .

Other key themes to emerge from our review of the application process were the lack of linkage between the application form questions and the interview. 3 senior civil servants stated answers provided on the application form were not then followed up in the interview and the interview should be used to probe further on areas from application form. They could not fully understand the link between the application form and the interview and 2 senior civil servants stated the application form was too long. This suggests applicants were being asked to complete a long application form and the not being asked about it during the interview. 2 senior civil servants felt the interview process was very rigid and found there to be a lack of ‘human touch’. It was also commented that if you know how the system works then this plays as an advantage during the interview stage as internal candidates know the structure of the interview and the recruitment process. One senior civil servant who was an external candidate suggested:

“It would be useful to have a session for external recruits on how the recruitment process works and what is involved”

This suggested the process is too complex for external applicants to understand. 1 applicant made reference to the fact Professional qualifications or skills were not weighted and generic competencies such as communication, leadership and project management played a higher importance in the interview grading than professional attributes despite the role perhaps being a specialist one. The individual felt they were not being challenged on their professional experience as much as the standard competencies despite applying for a specialist role.

3.3.3 Improvements

Given that practices and processes vary across sectors and organisations, we asked all senior civil servant participants to comment on areas of improvement that would have supported a more effective process and a better candidate experience. The main areas highlighted were as follows:

- Reduce time taken to be told whether successful or not after panel interview.
- Application form related responses should be explored more in the interview, rather than the focus being mainly on generic competencies area.
- Professional skills need to be explored more and commented on during interview stage.

External organisations were also asked to comment on what, for them, proved a positive recruitment experience and effective process. Areas such as fewer questions in application forms and more use of psychometric testing were cited as positive experiences and ways to improve recruitment processes. By using psychometric testing at senior levels it allows participants to gain an understanding of the pressure they may expect to feel in the role and therefore this process gives the sense of a real life situation. As highlighted earlier senior civil servants found approaches in the recruitment process which were ‘real life’ beneficial. The use of external experts is also beneficial as one organisation highlighted they had a situation where they were struggling to recruit individuals with particular technical skills and by using external experts they were able to sift and hold initial interviews with individuals before passing the most suitable applicants to the organisation. This approach is more streamlined as it therefore means the organisation is not wasting time interviewing applicants who may not be suitable.

The NICS may wish to look at their recruitment process for senior level recruiting ensuring it is standard across the organisation and takes into account the latest recruitment techniques.

3.4 Salary and Benefits

Salary and benefits was another theme to emerge due to the research which has been published by the CIPD and, the internal pay review carried out by NICS which both will be referred to later in this report. The senior civil servants had a strong belief the salary was not competitive a) in comparison to private sector or b) in relation to a similar role in the market both in the private and public sector. Some of the SCS participants had been affected by pay freezes and the removal of bonuses and therefore felt the benefits packages were misleading. There was a strong sense amongst the senior civil servants that to employ high calibre senior individuals they had to be more competitive with pay and benefits. This was particularly important due to the changes in other benefits such as pensions which were seen to be highly sought in the Civil Service. There was a consensus however that there was less chance of redundancy and therefore job security was a strong benefit. They were positive about their roles and the organisation, however believed to attract high calibre there is still work the NICS need to do around salaries.

3.5 Brand

In recognition of the importance of employer branding in a competitive market for top talent it was essential to identify perceptions around the NICS as an organisation and employer. It was recognised by the senior civil servants that the NICS is a good employer that offers job security and good benefits. Historically pensions were one of the best benefits however this is changing due to pension reforms. It was also highlighted from the senior civil servants that the work they were involved in was interesting and was to helping shape the way the country operated through policy and legislation. From an external perspective some of the organisations perceived the NICS to be “process driven, safe, risk adverse and lacks innovation and creativity”. There was however a perceived understanding of what the NICS and civil servants do particularly around working with Ministers to drive policy changes.

From the senior civil servants interviewed 4 out of 6 described their employer as the department they worked in rather than the NICS and there was reference made that it was as if there was 12 small organisations rather than one big organisation. This is a key area for the NICS to enhance and market particularly on how to incorporate all the departments in order to market and promote itself as one organisation. This was further reflected by the senior civil servants in that they felt there was lack of understanding by the public/external facing organisations on what the NICS and particularly the senior civil service do. Increased media attention and more recently publicly naming civil servants may deter individuals applying to such roles. In relation to the research what we found was if you work within the NICS you understand the opportunities and the benefits however externally we found some of the respondents had the perception the NICS as a bureaucratic organisation and the detail of individual departments and opportunities is not evident or understood. The use of secondments is therefore a good area to enable individuals to gain a true understanding and representation of what the NICS and senior civil servants do.

As mentioned in section 3.1 many of the external organisations interviewed would consider a career with the NICS therefore this highlights the positive brand image in the market and with some

improvements around marketing the NICS over individual departments this may also help exemplify the image to the public and help them gain an understanding of what the NICS and civil servants do.

4. HR Connect Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction

Data was provided from HR connect in relation to the number of senior civil servant competitions held in 2010, 2011 and 2012. The data was used to provide further analysis on the number of applications and interviews per competition to highlight any significant areas of interest. The data also comprised of senior civil servant who left during the period which was used to analyse any patterns.

4.2 Competition Analysis

From the 2010-2012 period a total of 52 senior civil servant competitions were advertised in which 35 of the competitions were external and 17 were internal. Across all 52 competitions a total of 902 applications were submitted. The diagram below illustrates the competition breakdown and includes internal/external candidate split appointee level.



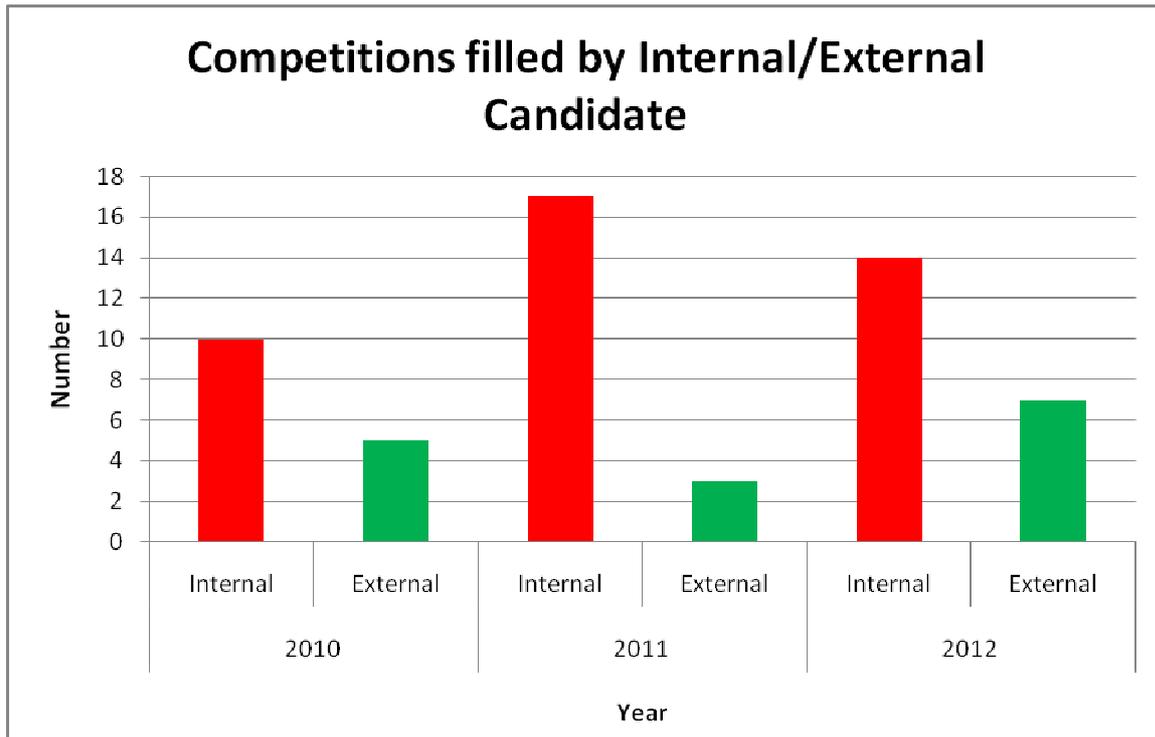
The data can be analysed further to show a breakdown of competitions on a yearly basis and this is illustrated in the table below. It shows 2010 and 2012 were very similar in terms of the volume of applications however 2011 shows 50% less applications.

NB; From the data provided by HR Connect out of the 52 positions there were in total 57 hires. This is due to timing of recruitment and payroll dates that some hires lie out-with the standard hires however the additional hires are included in the 52 competition list. The table also highlights 15 interviews took place in 2013 and this highlights the competition began in 2012 but the process crossed over into 2013 at interview stage.

Year	Number of Competitions	Internal/External Competitions	Number of Applications	Number invited to interview	Number attended interview
2010	17	1 Internal 16 External	367	131	55
2011	15	11 Internal 4 External	183	118	65
2012	20	5 Internal 15 External	352	139	61
2013					15

Despite 35 out of the 52 competitions having a method fill as external recruitment only 12 candidates in total came from external and in total out of the 52 competitions 39 were filled by internal candidates. The graph below shows the breakdown on a year by year basis. Given the high volumes of applications to the senior civil servant roles this illustrates there is a demand for the jobs but largely from internal candidates.

In comparison to external organisations one private sector organisation highlighted they had 46 senior recruitment competitions held in the last 2 years with a total of 2300 applications and of the 46 competitions 30 were internal appointed candidates and 16 were external appointed candidates. This organisation therefore experienced higher application numbers compared to the NICS however were slightly more successful in securing external candidates which may be reflected because of the brand of this organisation. They also noted they did not experience any recent challenges in senior level recruitment or recruiting high calibre candidates however due to some recent geographical changes in offices this may change over the next year or two.



We also received some data around applications which were sifted out during the recruitment process. 318 applications were dismissed for their eligibility criteria meaning applicants did not meet the standard criteria and in terms of application 27 were sifted out due to the form not being completed correctly. 40 were also dismissed at short listing stage and 126 were sifted out after attending an interview. The volume sifted for eligibility is an area the NICS may wish to further explore as this could suggest the application criteria are not clear or understood and therefore could be losing high calibre applicants.

5. Additional Research

5.1 CIPD Research

We thought it would be useful to highlight some GB market research around resourcing and planning which the CIPD conducted and published in 2012 which may prove relevant in terms of this piece of research. In 2012 all sectors interviews reported recruitment difficulties in which 82% of the public sector noted recruitment difficulties. They stated:

“The ongoing austerity measures and pay freezes in the public sector, coupled with the challenged of widespread reforms, may reduce its attractiveness to potential recruits”.

In the public sector 43% of organisations stated the reason for recruitment difficulties were respondents were: ‘looking for more pay than you could offer’.

The study also looked at retention rates across different sectors and roles and 40% of public sector organisations reported retention difficulties with retaining managers and professionals/specialists compared to 35% in the private sector and 22% in the not for profit sector. Similarly 14% of public sector organisations reported difficulties retaining senior managers/directors compared to 7% private sector and 8% not for profit. There are some links of what is reflect in the GB research that the NICS and SCS are facing including e.g. difficulties with recruitment and pay which highlights this is not just a specific NICS problem there are market difficulties.

The CIPD also published a study report in 2012 around employee attitudes to pay which 20% of public sector organisations received a pay rise in 2012 however 72% of public sector organisations were likely to have seen their pay frozen and only 13% operate a cash bonus scheme. This external pay analysis can then be applied to the NICS and SCS which will be discussed shortly. There is however still some significant differences between sectors regarding bonuses and pay rises as 48% of private organisations received a bonus in 2012 and 32% of organisations operate a cash bonus scheme. We have requested some more detailed CIPD research from the NI branch in order to do some more localised analysis however this has not yet been received.

5.2 NI Labour Market Research

In relation to the research we thought it would be useful to obtain some figures around local labour trends to help illustrate the local market. We obtained reports published by NISRA to help establish labour market trends within Northern Ireland. The figures were published March 2013 and are based on data from Nov12 – Jan13 however may also include annual trends. The unemployment rate in NI for November to Jan 2013 was 8.5% which as increased 2% over the year and is above the UK average of 7.8%. The economic inactivity rate for those aged 16-64 in NI is 27.4% which has increased 0.2% over the year and remains above the UK average and was the highest rate among the 12 UK regions. Gross weekly earnings for all NI employees (FT and PT) is 1.6% (£360.20) which compared to the UK which increased by 1.3% to (405.0). NI is therefore still behind UK however the gap amongst private sector earnings is closing between the regions. This information may prove useful to the NICS and SCS in order to understand the labour market and what the current picture looks like. This may also be useful in terms of recruiting for senior jobs within the NICS as there may be high calibre talent within the unemployment market that NICS could tap into. Alternatively potential candidates (perhaps GB/Overseas) may be interested in living standards/earnings in NI

therefore it essential for the NICS to understand the market in order to packages are attractive to potential recruits.

5.3 Pay Review

In 2010 a review of the Northern Ireland Senior Civil Service pay was carried out in order to determine the pay arrangements for Senior Civil Servants. The model is based on the same three broad pay bands which the SCS in Great Britain operate and is based on performance –related increases. The first point to note is even though the same models are used, the median pay for each band in NI is significantly lower than in the GB and Northern Ireland Executive suspended bonus arrangements since 2009 and to date has not yet been re-introduced. There was also a review carried out for NICS SCS in comparison to other senior grades in the wider local public market which highlighted NICS SCS is behind in pay for roles including Permanent Secretary/Chief Executive and Grade 5/Assistant Directors. The NICS SCS were seen to be competitive for Grade 3/Director roles however there is still some work to be done in order to close the gap particularly as bonuses have been removed since 2009. This was also the view from the SCS we interviewed that more work had to be carried out in regards to reviewing the salary. They also conveyed in order to recruit high calibre individuals particularly externally then the salary needed to improve. With more government reforms around pensions and pay freezes within the public sector the NICS may wish to consider conducting another pay review internally and in the wider market as based on the small number interviews pay seems to be an important factor involved in perceptions and attitudes to careers within the NICS SCS and attracting high calibre talent.

6. Conclusions

This research aimed to analyse perceptions and attitudes to careers within the NICS. In doing so, there were 4 key questions which we aimed to answer which are identified in section 1 and these will be answered individually below.

Does the NICS attract enough high calibre candidates to apply for senior positions compared to other similar organisations?

From the research it was identified there is a large pool of talent applying for senior positions within the NICS in which 902 applications were received for 52 competitions across a period from 2010 to 2012 which highlights there is demand. However, only 197 of the applications were from external candidates and filled by 12 external candidates suggesting the external talent is limited. From the sift data it was evident a large amount of applications were sifted out due to eligibility criteria and therefore some further analysis could be applied to understand of those sifted out how many were external.

Which types of senior roles and NICS organisations have the most difficulty in attracting a sufficiently high calibre applicant pool?

From our research we did not identify any specific senior roles or NICS organisations which have difficulty in attracting high calibre applicant pool. We had initially requested to obtain data on applicants who had started to apply but stopped at some point during the process however this data could not be provided and we have therefore identified this as a recommendation for further study below as we believe this may provide another dimension to this research. This would enable to understand what the reasons were for applicants not completing the application the NICS/SCS.

What particular or perceived barriers exist?

There were however some barriers identified which may deter people from applying and these included the application process, benefits package and employer brand. The Senior Civil Servants highlighted the process to apply to the SCS was time consuming, particularly after the interview stage and the interview itself was very process bound with little linkage between the initial application form and the interview. Comments were made that some employees who know how the application process worked could 'play' the system and therefore have an advantage over external employees. They did however comment some of the approaches in the process are useful particularly those which reflected a real life situation.

Another prevalent theme in the research relates to pay and benefits. Many of the senior civil servants interviewed highlighted the pay was not good enough in terms of the responsibility and pressure they face in the role and in order to attract high calibre, particularly external candidates they need to increase pay. Bonuses have been revoked and in comparison to external organisations both local public sector and private sector GB the NICS pays lower. Other benefits in the past such as pensions were sought for in the NICS, SCS and wider public sector however recent Government reforms no longer make this benefit attractive therefore pay and benefits is an area the NICS need to look at further.

Finally, we looked at the employer brand of the NICS and SCS and although there were some differing views ultimately they are viewed to be a good employer and this is reflected in the volumes of applications for SCS positions. Internal employees understood the benefits and opportunities that are available within the NICS and SCS however there was one external view that the organisation is “Bureaucratic, risk adverse and lacks innovation and creativity”. In order to explore this further a larger sample would have to be used so a more valid conclusion could be made. Senior civil servants also highlighted they felt the public and external organisations do not understand fully what the NICS and SCS do.

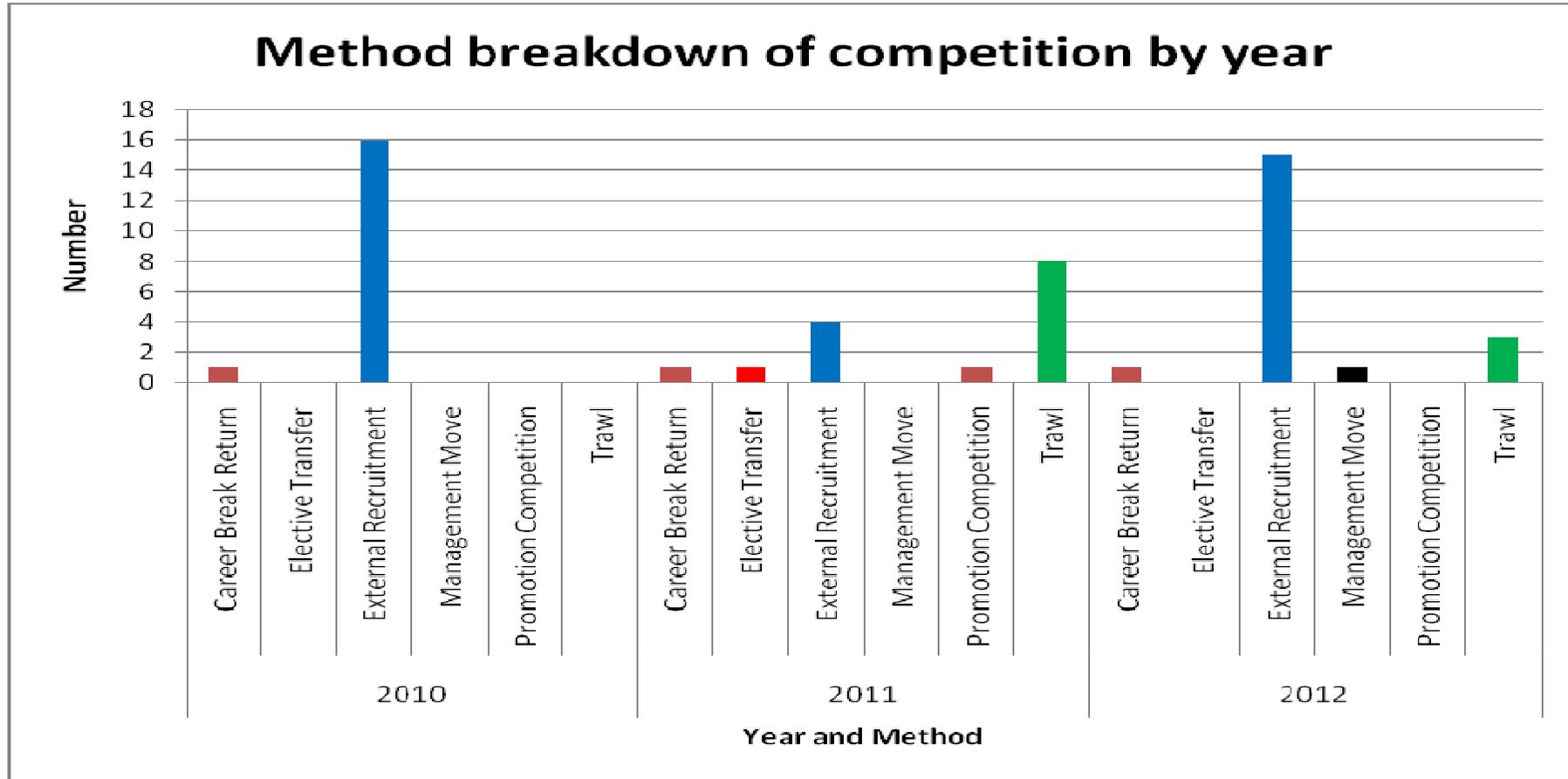
What should the NICS do to address these issues in the future?

In order for the NICS to address some of the issues mentioned above there are certain recommendations we suggest and are identified below.

- If possible it would be useful to explore further into those applicants who had started the application process but stopped. This would include analysing data around incomplete application forms and also speaking to individuals who had started the application form to find out why they did not finish or pulled out applying.
- The NICS to ensure there is a single recruitment process for all SCS roles and is communicated clearly to all applicants. The NICS may also want to look further at what external organisations are doing in terms of recruitment such as the use of psychometric testing, assessment centres and employing external experts.
- The NICS may wish to consider looking further into the brand and perhaps want to look further into secondments as a method of doing this as they those candidates who had completed a secondment felt it give them a strong insight and understanding into the NICS and SCS.

7. Appendices

7.1 Appendix A - Method of Fill Breakdown



7.2 Appendix B - Department Key

<u>Key</u>	<u>Department</u>
OFMDFM	Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister
DARD	Agriculture and Rural Development
DCAL	Culture Arts and Leisure
DOE	Environment
DEL	Employment and Learning
DETI	Enterprise Trade & Investment
DE	Education
DFP	Finance and Personnel
DHSSPS	Health, Social Service and Public Safety
DOJ	Justice
DRD	Regional Development
DSD	Social Development
PPS	Public Prosecution Service
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
AFBI	Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute
NIPB	Northern Ireland Policing Board
NIO	Northern Ireland Office