



CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSIONERS
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSIONERS

2017/18 AUDIT AND REVIEW SUMMARY REPORT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Executive Summary	4
2. Commissioners' Statutory Audit Function	7
3. Commissioners' 2017/18 Audits and Reviews	9
3.1 Review of Assurances Required Under Commissioners' Senior Civil Service Appointments Authorisation and Approval Process 2017/18	9
3.2 Commissioners' Review of Strategic Investment Board (SIB) Staff Working in the NICS	10
3.3 Internal Review of CSCNI Secretariat's Management of the 4-Stage Process	11
3.4 Issues progressed under Commissioners' Structured Engagement Meetings	11
4. Commissioners' 2018/19 Audit and Review Plan	16
5. Related Links	18

Acknowledgement

Commissioners would like to express our appreciation for the positive engagement offered by staff in NICS HR within the Department of Finance (DoF), the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Departments and their resourcing partner HR Connect during the conduct of this audit and review engagement process and the follow-up work arising from it.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Commissioners' 2017/18 Audit and Review Opinion

Commissioners have examined a range of evidence gathered in the course of pursuing our statutory functions throughout the year, including the assurances provided on behalf of the NICS by the Department of Finance Permanent Secretary in their annual Statement of Compliance. Based on the information available, it is Commissioners' opinion that the NICS selection and recruitment practices are in keeping with the requirements set out in the Recruitment Code.

Article 4(4) of the Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, requires Commissioners to audit recruitment policies and practices followed in making appointments to situations in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) to establish if they are operating in line with the Commissioners' Recruitment Code.

During 2017/18 Commissioners continued to exercise our statutory audit functions through a variety of means including evidence-based assurances from the Department of Finance Permanent Secretary (who has responsibility for recruitment to the NICS) Departmental staff, NICS HR and HR Connect.

Commissioners also examined a range of recruitment issues through structured engagement meetings with NICS HR and conducted audit reviews into the following areas:

Review of Assurances Required Under Commissioners' Senior Civil Service Appointments Authorisation and Approval Process 2017/18

Commissioners have a statutory role under Article 6 of the Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 to approve appointments to the Senior Civil Service (SCS) made by open competition, which is implemented via a process known as the 4-Stage Authorisation Process. Commissioners undertook a review of the assurances provided as part of the 4-Stage Process in 2017 to assess if they continue to appropriately address the risks associated with the current NICS recruitment process and provide adequate assurance in relation to adherence to the Recruitment Code. The review found that the SCS 4-Stage Authorisation Process provides satisfactory information and assurances in support of Commissioners' decision making on whether authorisation to proceed with a SCS appointment to the NICS should be given at each stage of the process and also identified a number of improvements that could be made to strengthen and update the process.

Commissioners' Review of Strategic Investment Board (SIB) Staff Working in the NICS

Commissioners undertook a review into the appointment of Strategic Investment Board (SIB) staff working in the NICS to determine the number of SIB staff that were working in NICS Departments, their status in the NICS, the period during which they were in post and the nature of the engagement between SIB and the NICS. The review found a number of issues with regard to the terms of appointment and, as an outcome of Commissioners' Review, the NICS has committed to a programme of work to review SIB appointments and clarify related policy and guidance.

Internal Review of the management of the 4-Stage Authorisation Process by OCSC

An annual internal audit of the OCSC (NI) Secretariat's management of the 4-Stage Authorisation Process was undertaken and found that procedures were satisfactorily applied by OCSC Secretariat and the process is operating in line with the Recruitment Code.

Further detail on the issues covered as part of Commissioners audit and review processes are included within Section 3 of this report.

Looking Ahead

Commissioners commend the NICS on its management of the significant changes the NICS Government Reform Programme has achieved in recent years, in particular following the reduction in the number of departments from twelve to nine and the centralisation of NICS HR. Commissioners look forward to seeing the benefits of the streamlining and consolidation of HR functions into a more agile and modern HR service.

Commissioners are pleased to note that the NICS HR has commissioned an independent review of the NICS HR transformation project, which will consider the current and future models of delivery with regard to the centralised HR functions and services. Commissioners look forward to receiving regular updates as this work progresses and we will continue to engage with NICS HR to ensure that the role and requirements of Commissioners are taken into account in any proposed changes to service delivery or to recruitment and selection policies and procedures as appropriate.

Commissioners were also pleased to receive an update from NICS HR on planned improvements to the approach to Strategic Workforce Planning in the NICS. Commissioners consider that this model will enable NICS HR to develop a consistent, corporate approach to workforce planning across the NICS, which in turn will help to address some of the audit and resourcing issues identified in the course of

Commissioners' work. Commissioners also commend the improved use of data and modelling information to assist with planning and forecasting, which should complement data monitoring improvements implemented in response to Commissioners' 2015 Review of Recruitment Related Data.

Commissioners are pleased to note a key focus on diversity and inclusion in the development of the NICS People Strategy which we consider to be central to the merit principle. Commissioners have worked closely with NICS HR to improve data monitoring related to recruitment competitions and we welcome the consideration NICS HR is giving to outreach measures, which will help to address areas of under-representation in the NICS. We are particularly pleased to note the intention to apply a 'diversity and inclusion lens' to everything the NICS HR does, which we consider will help to build on the positive internal work of the NICS Diversity Champions Network reported last year and that this is reflected in the new NICS People Strategy.

Commissioners also look forward to continuing positive engagement with NICS HR across the full range of recruitment and selection matters in pursuance of our statutory function to uphold the principle of merit and adherence to the Recruitment Code.

2. COMMISSIONERS' STATUTORY AUDIT FUNCTION

Article 4(4) of the Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, requires Commissioners to audit recruitment policies and practices followed in making appointments to situations in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) to establish whether or not the four key principles set out in the Commissioners' Code have been upheld in spirit and in practice.

In discharging our statutory duty, Commissioners seek to strike a balance between ensuring compliance with the Recruitment Code and delivering a proportionate and effective approach to our oversight role. In support of this, Commissioners adopted a revised approach to audit and review in 2015/16, which is underpinned by assurances and improved structured engagement in order to influence improvements to NICS recruitment policies and practices.

NICS Recruitment Assurances

Commissioners consider it essential that the revised approach to audit and review is complemented by an evidence based assurance framework. 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; and
- (b) evidence to provide assurance that recruitment policies and practices in the NICS are subject to regular internal monitoring.

Permanent Secretary Assurance Statement

The Permanent Secretary Statement of Compliance was introduced in 2016/17 to confirm adherence to the Commissioners' Recruitment Code for all appointments made to NICS Departments and the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) during the relevant reporting period.

Structured Engagement with NICS HR

Commissioners also exercise their statutory audit role through structured engagement meetings with NICS HR to examine a range of recruitment issues, which is supported by dedicated audit and review meetings for Commissioners allowing for detailed consideration of audit matters and operational meetings between the Secretariat and NICS resourcing staff to progress and monitor audit and review action points.

Commissioners' Audit and Reviews

Formal audit and review of NICS recruitment activities remains a key focus for the delivery of Commissioners' regulatory functions. To this end, Commissioners identify and prioritise, through our Strategic Audit and Review Planning process, areas of recruitment we wish to examine as part of our 3-year Audit and Review Strategy, which are then progressed through an Annual Audit Plan.

Commissioners' approach to audit is set out in [Regulating for Improvement - Audit Framework and Guidance](#). This requires that audit and reviews undertaken on behalf of Commissioners adhere to agreed standards and produce robust, evidence-based and reliable audit findings. This is also available from our website www.nicscommissioners.org.

3. COMMISSIONERS' 2017/18 AUDITS AND REVIEWS

Commissioners use a range of oversight options and methodologies to obtain assurance and influence improvements to NICS recruitment policies and practices under their statutory audit function. During 2017/18, Commissioners exercised their statutory audit role by conducting reviews into the Assurances Required under Commissioners' Senior Civil Service (SCS) Appointments Authorisation and Approval Process and SIB Staff Working in the NICS and an internal review of the management of the 4-Stage Authorisation Process and through structured engagement meetings with NICS HR to examine a range of recruitment issues.

3.1 Review of Assurances Required Under Commissioners' Senior Civil Service Appointments Authorisation and Approval Process 2017/18

Commissioners have a statutory role under Article 6 of the Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 to approve appointments to the Senior Civil Service (SCS) made by open competition. To support the approval process, the NICS, via HR Connect, is required to provide a number of specific assurances to Commissioners at four key stages for each external senior competition to confirm compliance with NICS recruitment policy and procedures and Commissioners' Recruitment Code. This process is managed by the OCSC Secretariat on behalf of Commissioners and is known as the 4-Stage Authorisation Process.

Commissioners undertook a review of the assurances provided as part of the 4-Stage Process in 2017 to assess if they continue to appropriately address the risks associated with the current NICS recruitment process and provide adequate assurance in relation to adherence to the Recruitment Code.

Review findings

The review found that the SCS 4-Stage Authorisation Process provides satisfactory information and assurances in support of Commissioners' decision making on whether authorisation to proceed with a SCS appointment to the NICS should be given at each stage of the process.

The review also identified where a number of improvements could be made to strengthen and update the process, these included:

- the wording of specific assurances should be revised and additional statements included to augment the evidence on which Commissioners base our approval;
- documentation associated with the SCS 4-Stage Approval Process should be revised to improve functionality and presentation, where possible; and

- a dedicated annual meeting between the OCSC and end-users of the 4-Stage Process would provide for improved communication and understanding with regard to the process.

Review outcomes

- OCSC Secretariat, on behalf of Commissioners, has commenced a Review of 4-Stage Process documentation to implement the findings of the Review of Assurances; and
- a dedicated annual meeting has been agreed by all parties involved in the management and operation of the SCS 4-Stage Process.

3.2 Commissioners' Review of Strategic Investment Board (SIB) Staff Working in the NICS

The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) is an arm's length body of The Executive Office (TEO) formerly the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). SIB was established by the enactment of Part 2 of the Strategic Investment and Regeneration of Sites (Designation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2003 (SIRS Order 2003). Regulation 3 of the General Regulations 2007 prescribes the circumstances in which appointments may be made to the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) other than in accordance with the Merit Principle. An appointment by an exception to the Merit Principle means an appointment to a situation in the Civil Service in circumstances prescribed by Commissioners in Regulation 3, subject to any conditions specified in the Code, where the Merit Principle does not apply.

Commissioners decided to undertake a review in order to ascertain the number of SIB staff that were working in NICS Departments, their status in the NICS, the period during which they were in post and the nature of the engagement between SIB and the NICS.

Review findings

The review highlighted a number of key issues, including the following:

- there was a lack of consistency in the manner in which the status of SIB staff were referred to by Departments;
- supporting documentation was, on occasions, incomplete and generic;
- in some circumstances the appointment was for an extended period;
- a number of SIB staff were permanent SIB employees while others were recruited by SIB specifically to fulfil a role in the NICS; and
- a number of individuals, recruited because their skills were said to match a particular role had, on the completion of that assignment, moved to fill a different role in another Department.

Review outcomes

As an outcome of the review, the NICS have committed to the following programme of work to:

- review relevant NICS policies to include: a clearer definition of secondees and internal consultants including associated governance – to include monitoring and reporting processes; clearer guidance on the options available to meet a skills gap and the criteria for choosing how these options are considered; process to ensure knowledge transfer; and clear terms of reference and timescales for the assignment;
- review existing documentation to ensure the contractual relationship between the individual, SIB and the Department is clearly set out;
- issue revised guidance to departments (supplemented by training/workshops as required);
- propose any potential changes to the Recruitment Code for consideration by Commissioners; and
- work with Departments and Commissioners in light of new guidance/policies to agree the categorisation of current assignments and regularise these as necessary.

Commissioners will continue to engage with the NICS in relation to this matter and will consider the outcomes of the programme of work being undertaken in due course.

3.3 Internal Review of the management of the 4-Stage Authorisation Process

In addition to Commissioners' outward facing statutory audit function with regard to the NICS, an annual internal audit of the OCSC (NI) Secretariat's management of the 4-Stage Authorisation Process is also undertaken to ensure it is operating in line with the procedures. The audit found that procedures were satisfactorily applied by OCSC Secretariat at each stage of the process and Commissioners are assured that the 4-Stage Authorisation Process is operating in line with the Recruitment Code.

3.4 Issues Progressed Under Commissioners' Structured Engagement with NICS HR

Commissioners examined a range of recruitment issues under the engagement process with the NICS, including a number of outstanding action points from Commissioners' 2016/17 audits and reviews.

Permanent Secretary Assurance Statements

Commissioners reported in 2016/17 on the introduction of '*Permanent Secretary Statements of Compliance*' to confirm adherence to the Commissioners' Recruitment

Code for all appointments made to NICS Departments and the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) during the annual reporting period. Commissioners continued to engage with NICS HR during 2017/18 to revise the framework to take account of the introduction of NICS HR and associated changes in the structure and delivery of the HR function.

The revised 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 HR Connect and Competition Leads when running an external competition;
- annual assurances from all Grade 7s within the Vacancy Management Team;
- annual confirmation from Permanent Secretaries/Accounting Officers that all appointments have been managed by NICS HR Resourcing; and
- the above evidence is collated by NICS HR and provided to the DoF Permanent Secretary for consideration and, if satisfied, issue of the annual statement of compliance to Commissioners.

Commissioners are content that this revised approach maintains an appropriate level of accountability and is underpinned by adequate evidence to support the assurances and improved NICS monitoring and review processes. Commissioners commend the positive and constructive approach taken by NICS HR to ensure Commissioners' expectations were met.

Commissioners, in accordance with the revised approach, welcomed the consolidated 2017 Statement of Compliance, from the DoF Permanent Secretary, who confirmed that all appointments made to the NICS and the PPS during the 2017 reporting period complied with the Commissioners' Recruitment Code.

In particular, Commissioners are pleased that the NICS has responded positively to our invitation to publish details of the revised assurance framework in their 2017 Annual Report on Recruitment to the NICS. Commissioners intend to review the assurance framework and supporting evidence under the next 3-year Audit and Review Strategy.

2015/16 Review of NICS Recruitment and Selection Training

As guardians of merit, Commissioners regard appropriate and effective training for all those involved in recruitment as fundamental in ensuring adherence to the Recruitment Code.

Commissioners completed an audit review of NICS Recruitment and Selection Training in 2015/16 and concluded that the objectives of the NICS Recruitment and Selection training modules are in line with the expectations of the Commissioners' Recruitment

Code. The review identified a number of issues for the NICS to consider in relation to the content and delivery of training. In response, NICS HR committed to undertaking a review of this training in 2017/18.

Commissioners acknowledge that the NICS HR transformation project has impacted on the commencement of this work, however we are very encouraged that, following further discussion on this matter, NICS HR prioritised their review into the effectiveness of recruitment and selection training.

Commissioners welcomed the opportunity to consider and discuss the scope of the NICS review and the further assurances from NICS HR that Commissioners' observations will be given appropriate attention in the NICS Review.

Furthermore, Commissioners are pleased to note the NICS training review will also consider issues identified in the course of Commissioners' audit work relating to feedback to candidates and improvements associated with the completion of Candidate Information Assessment Booklets by panel members.

Commissioners will consider and report on the outcomes of the NICS review in their 2018/19 Annual Report.

2015/16 Review of the Management of Merit Lists

Commissioners' Review of the Management of Merit Lists commenced in 2015 and was completed in two stages. The review examined the policies and processes the NICS have in place to ensure that the NICS management of merit lists is in line with the Commissioners' Recruitment Code. The Code requires that measures are in place to ensure that appointments are made in order of merit and due regard has been paid to the potential for unfair treatment of those who are not given the opportunity to be considered for appointment.

Commissioners reported last year that the Review of Merit Lists found that the routine operation of merit lists in the NICS, insofar as it is a systems driven process, is well managed by HR Connect and is compliant with NICS Policy and Procedures and Commissioners' Code. In relation to the non-routine operation of NICS merit lists, a number of issues were identified with regard to the recording and reporting of decisions to extend a merit list on which we continued to engage with NICS HR over the course of 2017/18 and are pleased to have reached an agreed policy position with regard to the management of merit lists in 2017.

While the decision to extend a merit list is a management and control issue for the NICS, Commissioners retain an interest by virtue of our 4-Stage Authorisation Process applicable to SCS appointments. Consequently we welcome that Commissioners will now be informed of NICS decisions to approve an extension to an

SCS competition merit list and to be provided with the following supporting information:

- the original closing date of the merit list;
- the revised closing date of the list;
- the cogent and practical reasons for extending the list;
- the reasons why all appointments have not been made before the original closing date of the merit list;
- the number of expected further appointments to be made from the list;
- the outcomes of the competition diversity considerations conducted by Equality and Diversity Branch; and
- the reasons why a new competition cannot be run from which to make further appointments.

This information will inform Commissioners consideration of any request via the SCS 4-Stage Authorisation Process to approve an appointment from a merit list which has been extended and ensure that the principle of merit is upheld. We also welcome agreement from NICS HR to publish details of any extensions to merit lists below SCS in their Annual Report on Recruitment to the NICS.

Use of Agency Workers to fill positions in the NICS

Commissioners have continued to engage with the NICS regarding the use of agency workers to fill positions in the NICS. While the use of agency workers sits outside of Commissioners' statutory remit in relation to appointments to the NICS through open competition, we consider that we have a valid interest in the use of agency workers insofar as there may be potential to impact on open recruitment to the NICS.

Commissioners recognise that the use of agency workers is a legitimate mechanism for the NICS to manage short term and unexpected business needs. Having engaged with the NICS on this matter, Commissioners welcome that the use of agency workers is being more closely monitored and controlled by the NICS and, in the interests of public confidence, are pleased to see that NICS HR responding positively to Commissioners' invitation to publish commentary on the use of agency workers in the their annual report 2017.

Establishment of NICS HR

Commissioners engaged with the NICS to ensure that Commissioners' role was taken into account in the establishment of NICS HR in April 2017 and Commissioners commend the NICS on its management and implementation of the centralisation of HR functions. The Strategic HR Director has continued to engage with Commissioners, setting out the vision and aspiration to transform the delivery of the NICS strategic HR function. Commissioners note the progress and the positive developments introduced over the year, in particular the development of the new

NICS People Strategy; actions to improve people management and leadership capability across all levels of the NICS and a more proactive approach to diversity and inclusion within the NICS workforce.

Monitoring equality and diversity in recruitment

Following Commissioners 2015/16 Review of Recruitment Related Data, we have continued to engage with NICS HR with regard to improvements to the collection and use of NICS recruitment data. Commissioners were pleased to receive an update from NICS HR with regard to how agreed improvements to NICS recruitment monitoring are being progressed and on the outcomes of the Article 55 (in relation to community background) and Gender Reviews.

Through this engagement, Commissioners have also highlighted the importance of using the monitoring and review data to inform the outreach plan and diversity considerations within Departments and were pleased to receive confirmation that the data will feed into other strands of work including:

- NICS Gender Action Plan;
- NICS Marketing and Outreach Strategy;
- Senior Women's Network Plan; and
- NICS Diversity Action Plan.

We are also pleased to report that the NICS responded positively to Commissioners' request to publish commentary in the Annual Report on Recruitment to the NICS on the following areas:

- Extensions to the merit lists;
- Agency Workers in the NICS; and
- Revised arrangements for Recruitment Related Assurances to Commissioners.

Diversity and inclusion in relation to recruitment activities will continue to be a key theme for engagement in 2018/19.

4. COMMISSIONERS' 2018/19 AUDIT AND REVIEW PLAN

In line with Commissioners' 2016-19 Audit and Review Strategy, Commissioners prepare an annual audit plan setting out audit reviews which have been scheduled for that period. The plan is monitored and reviewed at regular intervals, and revised as necessary in accordance with business need and emerging priorities.

The following areas of NICS selection and recruitment have also been identified for review during 2018/19:

- Commissioners' 4-Stage Authorisation Process Documentation;
- Recruitment Related Complaints; and
- Desk-top Compliance Review of a number of non-Senior Civil Service NICS Recruitment Competitions.

Commissioners' 4-Stage Authorisation Process Documentation

As noted earlier, the Civil Service Commissioners have a statutory role to approve appointments to the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) by open competition. To support this, Commissioners have a detailed 4-Stage Authorisation Process which must be followed for all open competitions leading to appointment to the SCS. This process requires the NICS to provide a number of assurances to Commissioners at key stages of a recruitment competition to confirm that the process has complied with NICS recruitment policy and procedures and the Commissioners' Recruitment Code.

Commissioners undertook a review of this area in 2017/2018, the 'Review of Assurances Required under Commissioners' Senior Civil Service Appointments Authorisation and Approval Process 2017/18'. A recommendation of this review was to examine the 4-Stage Process documentation in order to make it more efficient and user friendly for the NICS (including HR Connect) and OCSC, while continuing to maintain the supporting assurance to Commissioners in relation to NICS compliance with the Recruitment Code.

Commissioners will therefore commence a review of the 4-Stage Authorisation Process documentation to consider revising the presentation, format and content of the assurances and template documents with a view to identifying and recommending any further potential improvements or refinements to the assurances sought or supporting documentation. This review will be internally focused within OCSC and will concentrate primarily on template documents and records held by OCSC. We will report on the outcome of this review in the 2018/19 Annual Report.

Recruitment Related Complaints

Commissioners consider complaints to be a valuable indicator of the success of any system and the Recruitment Code sets out our expectation that complaints relating to NICS recruitment are dealt with in an efficient, appropriate and timely manner. NICS HR commenced publishing statistical data on the number of recruitment related complaints in their 'Annual Report on Recruitment to the NICS 2016', which covers the 2015 reporting year. Commissioners have therefore decided to undertake a review of this area to improve our understanding of the nature of the complaints received and consider if they point to any areas Commissioners would wish to examine with regard to compliance with the Code. The review will also consider the NICS process for determining that an issue should be treated as a complaint and how complainants have been dealt with in terms of expectations set out in the Code. We will report on the outcome of this review in the 2018/19 Annual Report.

Desktop Compliance Review of non-Senior Civil Service NICS Recruitment Competitions

Commissioners will conduct a desk-top compliance review to determine the extent to which the Commissioners' Recruitment Code has been complied with at all stages of the NICS recruitment and selection process. While Commissioners' have a statutory role to approve all appointments to the SCS, this Review will provide an opportunity to examine a sample of non-SCS competitions to assess of the application of the Code in circumstances where Commissioners have had no prior scrutiny role.

Commissioners will report progress on this review, and as appropriate, outcomes of this review in our 2018/19 Annual Report.

5. RELATED LINKS

NI Civil Service Commissioners Website
[Commissioners' Website](#)

Regulating For Improvement – Civil Service Commissioners' Audit Framework and Guidance Document
[Auditing For Improvement: Audit Framework and Guidance Document](#)

NI Civil Service Commissioners Recruitment Code
[Recruitment Code](#)

NI Civil Service Commissioners Order
[Civil Service Commissioners Order 1999](#)

NI Civil Service Recruitment Policy and Procedures Manual
[NICS Policy and Procedures Manual - Version 16](#)