



## MEDIA RELEASE

### Capacity and Capability in the Northern Ireland Civil Service

The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) must transform how it plans, recruits, manages and develops its workforce if it is to successfully address current and future challenges and deliver value for money. That is the conclusion of a report on 'Capacity and Capability in the NICS' published today (18 November 2020) by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Mr Kieran Donnelly CB.

Mr Donnelly's report examines the degree to which the NICS workforce is sufficiently equipped in terms of both staffing numbers (**capacity**) and appropriate skills, knowledge and expertise (**capability**). It highlights that the NICS has faced unprecedented challenges in recent years. Substantial workforce restructuring and rationalisation has seen almost 4,000 staff leave the service between 2015 and 2019, primarily due to a voluntary exit scheme. Overall vacancy levels subsequently rose to 6.9 per cent at March 2019, with the 1,420 total staffing vacancies exceeding the combined workforces of the three smallest NICS departments.

This significant staff attrition, and the need to maintain existing services, has led to an ever increasing reliance on temporary staffing solutions. The report finds that agency costs in 2018-19, increased by 155 per cent when compared with 2016-17. Temporary promotions have also increased significantly in the four year period to March 2019, from 631 to 1,844 meaning 8.2 per cent of the overall NICS workforce was temporarily promoted at that time.

The report also finds that current NICS recruitment processes are cumbersome, slow, and do not provide sufficient assurance that the right people are placed in the right posts. It notes that appointments are generally made to grades rather than specific job roles and skills and experience most relevant to positions are not always tested. Many specialist activities, in areas such as project management, contract management and service delivery, are therefore being carried out by general service staff with the report highlighting existing skills gaps in several of these areas. Mr Donnelly concludes that more needs to be done to prioritise the identification and development of the skills, knowledge and experience which are key to the delivery of modern public services.

The NICS employs Northern Ireland's third largest workforce (22,300 staff at April 2019), with key responsibilities for delivering the Programme for Government. However, the report finds that only 19 staff within the overall workforce received an 'unsatisfactory' performance management rating for 2017-18, raising questions about the quality and value of this exercise. Further, prior to 2019-20, five of the nine NICS departments had not developed a formal workforce plan and whilst a consistent planning template was introduced across the NICS in 2019-20, only six departments could provide draft plans. As a result, an NICS-wide workforce plan has not yet been produced.

Commenting on the report's findings, Mr Donnelly said:

*"To function effectively, NICS departments require the right people, in the right place, at the right time. My report has found that, at a NICS-wide level, there has not been a strategic focus on ensuring this is the case."*

*"It is important to recognise that NICS staff have continued to deliver vital services to the people of Northern Ireland during unprecedented challenging circumstances, including preparing for the exit from the European Union and responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the NICS is now at a critical crossroads, struggling to deal with providing 'business as usual services'."*

**THIS STATEMENT IS ISSUED ON THE STRICT UNDERSTANDING THAT IT IS NOT FOR PUBLICATION OR BROADCAST BEFORE 00.01 hrs ON 18 NOVEMBER 2020**

*“Shortfalls in workforce capacity and capability have been a recurring theme in reports published by my office, and were also reflected in the recommendations stemming from the RHI Inquiry. The NICS has made progress in some areas but urgency, pace and investment in strategic workforce planning, organisational development and people management are all required. This report specifically highlights the need for more collaborative working and strong collective leadership throughout the NICS.”*

*“A real opportunity exists for a new Head of the Civil Service and the NICS Permanent Secretaries to use this report’s findings and recommendations to substantially transform the service and its culture and improve outcomes for citizens. Given the immense value that attaches to the work of public servants, now is the opportunity to drive this forward.”*

The NIAO has scheduled a further report, on ‘Managing attendance in central and local government’, for publication on Tuesday 24 November 2020.

ENDS

**Notes for Editors**

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). He and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. His reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. This report is available on the Audit Office website at [www.niauditoffice.gov.uk](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk). The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on 18 November 2020.
3. This report is due to be examined by the Public Accounts Committee at a hearing in December 2020.
4. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Christine Burns (028 9025 1083) or Conor McGeown (028 9025 1041)