

Media Release



Developing the Northern Ireland Food Animal Information System

Replacing a business-critical records system for Northern Ireland's livestock industry will take over five years longer than originally planned to deliver. The new system is costing the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) approximately £64m to complete. The delay in delivery means DAERA has lost nearly half the twelve year operating period of the system and has cost DAERA an additional £6m of internal costs. These are among the findings of a report published today (Thursday 29 June 2023) by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Dorinnia Carville.

The report on "Developing the Northern Ireland Food Animal Information System (NIFAIS)" considers key issues and lessons emerging from the development of the System. Managed by DAERA, the NIFAIS records real-time information on animal movements and animal health. This information is used for multiple purposes, including disease management, providing assurance to customers and consumers, and in applications for Single Farm Payments.

The Department awarded the contract for developing the system in 2016, based on a fifteen-year term that included an initial three years to build the system and twelve years of operation. Today's report notes that completion of the system is now expected in 2024, more than five years behind schedule. These delays were due to several issues, including a lack of understanding of complex system functionality, DAERA staff without appropriate skills assigned to the project, and communications with the supplier broke down when serious issues arose on the project.

Recently further delays have hit the project with Stage 1 of the project failing to meet its June 2023 deadline. This may impact further with the final delivery deadline in 2024 being put under pressure and further reducing the operational period of the new system.

The report acknowledges action taken by DAERA in response to these delays, such as changes to leadership and pausing the project to allow a re-evaluation of the business case. However, it added £6m to DAERA costs. In addition, the existing Animal Public Health Information System, which NIFAIS will replace, continues to operate 16 years after its expiry date, at an annual cost of approximately £0.5 million, and cannot be switched off until NIFAIS is complete.

Commenting on the report's findings, Dorinnia Carville said:

"I welcome the fact that the Department and the supplier resisted the temptation to persist with a failed delivery model, and instead took positive action to stop, re-evaluate and adopt a different approach. This flexibility was

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ultimately pivotal in getting the project back on track. That said, it is concerning that it took the Department so long to take this action. The system was due to go live by the end of 2018, but the Department's leadership did not respond until 2020 and took another year to get the project up and running again.

"The lessons emerging from this report have relevance to many other public sector projects. Appropriate governance, and having the right skills and experience in place from the outset, are vital to ensuring risks at both the procurement and development stage can be quickly identified and managed. In the case of the NIFAIS project, not having a modern system in place has resulted in benefits for stakeholders not being realised, and staff time not being spent on other departmental work, representing poor value for money for taxpayers."

ENDS

Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). She and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. The C&AG certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. She has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. Her reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. The report is available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Thursday 29 June 2023.
3. Background briefing can be obtained from the Northern Ireland Audit Office by contacting Declan Cooper (028 9025 1142).