

# Media Release

## Leading and Resourcing the Northern Ireland Civil Service



The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) has not delivered the scale and pace of reform necessary to demonstrate value for money in its workforce and people management. That is among the conclusions of a report published today (Tuesday 27 January) by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Dorinnia Carville's report on 'Leading and Resourcing the NICS' is a follow-up to a 2020 NIAO report on 'Capacity and Capability in the NICS' and a subsequent report by the NI Assembly's Public Accounts Committee (PAC). It provides an update on progress made in ensuring the NICS workforce, which totalled over 24,500 employees (excluding agency workers) in April 2025, is sufficiently equipped in terms of its size, skills and expertise.

Today's report notes that workforce challenges, many of which were highlighted in the 2020 NIAO report, have escalated, including:

- nearly 5,500 vacant posts declared by the NICS on 31 March 2025.
- a greater reliance on temporary staffing solutions. Nearly 5,000 agency workers were employed as of 1 April 2025 (more than double the number recorded in April 2019). In addition, over 3,000 NICS staff were temporarily promoted (representing 13 per cent of the workforce).
- increasing sickness absence rates, with an average of 13.4 days lost per staff year in 2024-25, compared with 12.6 days in 2018-19. Costs associated with sickness absence have also increased, from £32.9 million in 2018-19 to £48.8 million in 2024-25.

The report finds there has been a lack of progress in key strategic areas, such as workforce planning and recruitment. It notes concerns over both the reliability of workforce data used to identify resource requirements and the affordability of filling the high volume of posts currently declared as vacant. In addition, the report highlights that many previous recommendations on workforce reform are yet to be implemented over 5 years later. Only five of the 23 recommendations made by the NIAO in 2020 have been fully achieved. Similarly, of the 12 recommendations made by the PAC, just 5 have been delivered.

The report does identify some improvements, including enhanced governance arrangements with the establishment of a People Committee, a new People Strategy for 2025-30, and the launch of new apprenticeship, student and work placement programmes. However, it concludes that without sustained, collective leadership and urgent delivery, the NICS is at continued risk of failing to demonstrate value for money for its pay bill, which exceeded £1.27 billion in 2024-25 (before 2024 and 2025 pay awards).

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

*"Strong leadership and a rightsized workforce that has the requisite skills are essential for the NICS to successfully deliver critical public services and meet the priorities set out in the 2024-2027 Programme for Government. This requires a modernised approach to how the workforce is planned, recruited and managed. It is very disappointing that progress on implementing such reforms has fallen short of expectations arising from previous commitments, and that sickness absence rates remain high."*

*The NICS is such an important workforce for Northern Ireland's public services and therefore publication of a five-year People Strategy in April 2025 is welcome. Strong, collective leadership and urgent action from the NICS Board and senior civil servants will be key in delivering it. There is an opportunity now to utilise new technologies to accelerate the scale of transformation needed to improve efficiency and effectiveness and maximise the value for money of the NICS."*

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 outstanding recommendations from the 2020 NIAO report and the 2021 PAC report have been integrated into the NICS People Strategy 2025-2030.
3. The report will be 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 Tuesday 27 January 2026.