

# Media Release



## Raising Concerns in the Northern Ireland Public Sector

The Northern Ireland public sector has made notable progress in how it manages raising concerns, often known as whistleblowing, but there remains scope for improving culture, leadership and skills in this area. That is among the conclusions of a report published today (Friday 20 March) by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Dorinnia Carville's report on Raising Concerns in the Northern Ireland Public Sector considers mechanisms put in place by organisations including central government departments, local councils and health trusts. It follows a number of high-profile cases associated with raising concerns in recent years, as well as the publication of a 2023 Policy Framework for government departments.

Today's report notes that over 700 concerns have been raised across the public sector in the last five years. Whilst the number of concerns raised with councils has been largely unchanged, departments have seen an increase since the introduction of the Framework.

The largest category of classified concerns relates to potential fraud or maladministration. In cases where investigations were completed, only 10% of the concerns raised were upheld.

The report notes that there has been significant progress. All government departments now have updated policies and a Designated Officer in place to deal with raising concerns.

However, areas for improvement are also identified, including the need for:

- Development of specialised skills, specifically investigative skills, to ensure that all concerns are appropriately treated.
- Specific training for staff involved in raising concerns as well as general training to improve awareness of raising concerns.
- More sharing of good practice and reflection on what works between organisations.
- The introduction of a raising concern framework to help lead to better accountability in local government.
- Stronger leadership across public sector organisations on raising concerns.

The report highlights that in many government departments 'speak up champions' are not in place, despite this being a requirement of the 2023 Framework. Teams who dealt with raising concerns were in some instances isolated or not supported to fully carry out their functions.

There also remains scope for Audit and Risk Assurance Committees to actively monitor the processes around raising concerns, including ensuring there is appropriate capacity and capability to investigate concerns, and seeking assurance that all concerns are managed in accordance with policy.

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

*"A healthy and positive culture around raising concerns is essential to ensure transparency, integrity and accountability within the public sector. It helps organisations detect issues early, avoid costly mistakes, and improve service delivery for the public."*

*The 2023 NI Departments' Raising a Concern, Policy Framework was a very significant and welcome step forward. However, public sector leaders should continue to treat this as a priority and ensure their staff are informed, skilled and supported to raise concerns they have as well as manage those they receive.*

*Alongside this report today, I am delighted to publish an updated Good Practice Guide on Raising Concerns to support public sector bodies and their employees. This Guide, together with the recommendations in my report, will help central and local government assess their current arrangements and create the environment where raising concerns is encouraged, welcomed and managed effectively."*

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 and good practice guide 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 Friday 20 January 2026.