

Media Release



The Health Estate in Northern Ireland

The condition of Northern Ireland's health estate is deteriorating and a more strategic approach is needed to ensure the safe and efficient delivery of services, and to achieve value for money in managing this highly valuable public asset. These are among the findings of a report published today (Thursday 2nd July) by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Dorinnia Carville's report considers the management of the £3.7 billion health estate, which comprises around 1,500 freehold buildings and over 200 leasehold properties across more than 400 sites. It focusses on the role of Department of Health which retains overall accountability for managing the estate.

The report finds that, despite its importance, the estate is ageing and increasingly not fit for purpose. Nearly half of the estate is more than 50 years old, with around one sixth more than 75 years old. Many of these buildings predate current regulations and standards and, while the majority of the estate is identified as compliant with statutory regulations, 40 per cent is not fully compliant and is in need of upgrade.

The ageing nature of the estate is also reflected in a substantial and escalating maintenance backlog, which has risen to over £1.6 billion. Around £251 million of this relates to backlog maintenance assessed as high risk. The backlog follows an ongoing period of reduced maintenance expenditure. The Department has provided around £25 million annually since 2020-21 to address backlog maintenance, but such funding levels have been insufficient to substantially reduce or slow the rate of estate deterioration. While mitigations are in place and services continue to operate safely, the report finds that risks arising from estate condition and backlog maintenance will persist and may increase if not addressed.

The report also identifies inefficiencies in how the estate is used, including prolonged retention of vacant estate with a total Net Book Value of nearly £40 million. Some of these properties and sites have been vacant for a prolonged period (in some cases, decades), often with no proper plans in place for re-use or disposal. Vacant estate not only incurs ongoing costs but also represents missed opportunities to generate income at an earlier stage and reinvest this in public service delivery in Northern Ireland.

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

"The health estate is a critical enabler of frontline health and social care services. However, our findings show that much of the estate is ageing, in poor condition, and increasingly costly to maintain. It is important to note that mitigations are in place to protect patients, staff and services. However, this reactive approach risks storing up problems for the future when it will potentially be much more expensive to address them properly."

"The condition of the health estate is a longstanding challenge, with the overall picture remaining broadly unchanged over the past decade. Progress to address these issues has been constrained by limited resources, but there has also been an absence of a clear, long term strategic framework to improve the condition of the estate. Many of the recommendations in this report are aimed at supporting the Department and its Arm's-Length Bodies to develop this more strategic approach and ensure that the estate is aligned to operational needs."

"The Department already holds substantial data on the performance and condition of the health estate. It now needs to use that data better to improve decision-making and take action to better use the limited resources available and achieve more value for money."

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 will be available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk and is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Thursday 02 July 2026.
3. The health estate includes major hospital complexes, residential accommodation, day centres, health clinics, ambulance stations and fire stations.