



MEDIA RELEASE

Managing attendance in central and local government

The impact of consistently high levels of sickness absence on NI public sector service delivery is highlighted in a new joint report published today (Tuesday 24 November) by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Kieran Donnelly CB, and Local Government Auditor, Pamela McCreedy.

The report shows that in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) almost 13 days per employee were lost due to sickness in 2019-20, an increase of over 10 per cent in the last five years. Sickness absence levels in NI Councils are even higher, an average of almost 14 days per employee in 2018-19, with ranges from 10 to 17 days for individual councils. NIAO analysis shows that this represents an increase of 13 per cent since 2014-15.

NICS sickness absence levels are almost double that of the Civil Service in England. Sickness absence has cost the Northern Ireland Civil Service £169 million over the last five years. Levels of absence for councils are also the highest in the UK. Unlike the NICS, local councils do not routinely measure the overall costs due to sickness absence, but these are likely to be substantial.

Mr Donnelly commented:

“High levels of sickness absence within the public sector are not a new phenomenon. However, this report finds few signs of sustained improvement. It is time for public sector organisations to make a concerted effort to reduce the level of sickness absence and to develop a consistent approach to managing attendance. With that in mind, the Local Government Auditor and I identified a number of key principles in managing attendance that should be applied across central and local government.

“A strong attendance culture needs to be embedded across the Northern Ireland public sector, and driven from the top. We are recommending that organisations focus on targeting long-term absence through preventative measures and early intervention. It is also vital for all organisations to measure and analyse sickness absence levels if they are to understand their impact, not only in terms costs, but also on the quality of services delivered to the public.”

The new publication, which follows a NIAO report on ‘Capacity and Capability in the NI Civil Service’ published last week, notes long-term absences account for over three quarters of the working days lost in the NICS and almost two thirds of the days lost in local councils. The report highlights mental health conditions as a prominent cause of sickness absence which often leads to longer absences. The report adds that older employees continue to make up a significant proportion of the public sector workforce. Whilst older employees are not off more often, when they are it tends to be for longer periods of time and so organisations will need to consider how to support the health and wellbeing of older employees in future.

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Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General, Mr Kieran Donnelly, is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). He and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. He certifies

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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. As Local Government Auditor, Pamela McCreedy is responsible for leading all local government audits across Northern Ireland. The scope of external audit in Local Government covers not only the audit of the financial statements, but also the audited bodies arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources, as well as councils' performance improvement responsibilities. The Local Government Auditor has statutory authority to undertake comparative and other studies designed to enable her to make recommendations for improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of services by local government bodies and to publish her results and recommendations. Pamela McCreedy is also Chief Operating Officer for the Northern Ireland Audit Office.
3. The report is available on the [NI Audit Office website](#) and is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on 24 November 2020.
4. This publication follows a previous report from the Comptroller and Auditor General on 'Capacity and Capability in the Northern Ireland Civil Service', which was published on Wednesday 18 November 2020. That report included discussion of absence levels in the NICS, and was based on data relating to 2018-19. Today's publication on 'Managing attendance in central and local government' is based on the 2019-20 data from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, which was released in June 2020.
5. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Colette Kane (02890 251064)