



Northern Ireland Audit Office

MEDIA RELEASE

Raising Concerns: A good practice guide for the Northern Ireland public sector

Northern Ireland's public sector leaders must tackle head-on the cultural barriers stopping concerns from the public and workers being listened to and acted on. That is the message set out by the Comptroller and Auditor General Kieran Donnelly CB, as his office publishes a new good practice guide on Raising Concerns today (Thursday 25 June 2020).

The Guide, updated by the NIAO from a version published in November 2014, reflects key developments in the last five years. In particular, the report references the publication of *Freedom to Speak Up* by Sir Robert Francis QC in 2015, which made significant recommendations in relation to the health service in England, and the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Inquiry report, published in March 2020, which made recommendations on how public sector organisations should deal with concerns raised by the wider public.

The Guide will be formally launched at a virtual event being hosted later this morning by the Chief Executive's Forum. Among those speaking at the event are Sue Gray, Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance, and Dr Henrietta Hughes OBE, National Guardian for the NHS in England.

Speaking ahead of the launch, Mr Donnelly commented:

"I continue to receive correspondence from public sector employees who have tried to do the right thing by raising concerns with their employer, but have been ignored or not received a fair hearing, or who have even suffered as a result of speaking up. This situation must change. The recent Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Inquiry highlighted the consequences of genuine concerns not being properly addressed.

"Senior leaders in every public body in Northern Ireland need to take action to address the real and perceived barriers to raising concerns. They should formally review the effectiveness of their arrangements for responding to concerns against the good practice principles set out in this guide. It is important that such reviews are more than tick-box exercises. Strong and visible leadership is key to promoting the necessary culture change."

Sue Gray, Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance, added:

"I very much support the publication of this guide in such an important area. Recognition that raising concerns should be a normal, everyday event is welcomed, and is an approach that my Department has encouraged in our work in this area recently. I was also delighted to see that the importance of an open, supportive culture is emphasised in the guide and I believe there is more work we can do on this."

Dr Henrietta Hughes, National Guardian for the NHS in England, said: *"I am inspired that this is being developed for the whole public sector in Northern Ireland. I am delighted by the clarity with*

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which this guide emphasises that speaking up, raising concerns and whistleblowing all describe the same activity. The report's focus on making speaking up business as usual, and that no concern is too small, is particularly helpful."

Today's new good practice guide encourages organisations to put in place effective arrangements for receiving concerns from the wider public and ensuring that they are properly considered and appropriately acted upon. These include an obvious and well sign-posted route for members of the public wishing to raise a concern in the public interest. The report suggests organisations appoint a speak-up guardian or raising concerns champion who can be a source of advice and support for staff but, in addition, a key resource for connecting the organisation to service users and the wider public.

It is available to download from the NIAO website: niauditoffice.gov.uk.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO). He and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. He certifies 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. The C&AG is also a prescribed person under Public Interest Disclosure legislation and can receive concerns in relation to the proper conduct of public business, value for money and fraud and corruption.
2. The Guide also reflects the recommendations of the RHI Inquiry report in relation to external "whistleblowers" – those outside an organisation who have a genuine concern about the business of that organisation and want to raise it in the public interest. In the case of the RHI, a local businesswoman identified the potential for abuse of the scheme and raised her concerns with the relevant government department. She felt she wasn't listened to but did not know where else to turn. The RHI Inquiry recommended that:

"Better systems are needed for spotting early warnings and concerns from the public and businesses that something unexpected could be happening or going wrong..... Simply updating existing complaints and whistleblowing policies, although helpful, will not be sufficient, since relevant intelligence often does not come through these routes.

"The default response amongst officials should be that all Northern Ireland departments review their processes for obtaining, handling and responding to information from multiple routes, to ensure that they have robust systems to pick up early warnings and repeated signals, as well as evidence that a policy is working as intended."
3. The Chief Executives' Forum is the association of chief executive officers of civil and wider public service bodies in Northern Ireland.
4. The Guide is available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Thursday 25 June 2020.
5. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Neil Gray (028 9025 4345) or Valerie Evans (028 9025 1062).