



**Civil Service
Commissioners**
for Northern Ireland



**ANNUAL
REPORT**
2023-24



**ENSURING APPOINTMENT ON MERIT
AND SUPPORTING ETHICAL STANDARDS**





**Civil Service
Commissioners**
for Northern Ireland

OUR VISION:

A Civil Service for Northern Ireland which recruits and promotes the best and most diverse talent available in accordance with merit and free from personal and political patronage or partiality.

We, Your Majesty's Civil Service Commissioners
for Northern Ireland, present to Your Majesty
this Report on our work during the period

1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024



Deirdre Toner

Deirdre Toner
Chairperson



Sinéad Burns

Sinéad Burns



Dr Lesley Carroll

Dr Lesley Carroll



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Civil Service Commissioners

for Northern Ireland



Dr Lesley Carroll, Commissioner; Deirdre Toner, Chairperson; and Sinéad Burns, Commissioner.

As guardians of merit, we uphold the principle that selection for appointment to the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) should be on merit, on the basis of fair and open competition. Our Recruitment Code interprets the Merit Principle and applies it to the NICS recruitment process.

Our auditing of this process encourages confidence in recruitment procedures and helps ensure the most suitable candidate is appointed. We also have an independent role in hearing appeals from civil servants under the Code of Ethics to support the Civil Service core values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality.

CHAIRPERSON'S REVIEW

I am delighted to present this Annual Report on behalf of the Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland and, in doing so, to reflect on the challenges and achievements of the past year.

I would like to begin by thanking my fellow Commissioners, Sinéad Burns and Dr Lesley Carroll, for their dedication, support and assistance during a busy 2023-24. My thanks also go to the Secretariat which has continued to deliver effective and efficient support services, despite a reduction in staffing levels to 3.3 FTE. We bid farewell to Deputy Secretary, Joanne Wray, in January 2024 and to Jayne Logan whose secondment ended at the end of March 2024. I would like to thank them both for their valued contribution and service and wish them well for the future.

We saw the departure of NIO Permanent Secretary, Madeleine Alessandri, in June 2023 from Commissioners' sponsor department. I would like to thank Madeleine for the valuable support she provided to Commissioners during her tenure.



Madeleine was succeeded by Julie Harrison, who is no stranger to Commissioners, given her former role as a NICS Permanent Secretary. We look forward to working with her again in a different capacity.

Our best wishes also go to Mike Brennan, Permanent Secretary for the Department for the Economy, who retired in 2023-24 after many years of distinguished service. And again we look forward to working with Ian Snowden who was recently appointed to the post.



Commissioners would like to pay tribute to the NICS for their continued work, dedication and commitment to providing public services in difficult economic and politically challenging circumstances, and in the absence of an Executive. Naturally, we welcomed the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly on 3 February 2024 and the return to stable government which is so important for investment and prosperity in Northern Ireland. We look forward to supporting the NICS and its departments in the year ahead, within the scope of our remit, to make sure that the NICS attracts the best people with the right skills to deliver excellent public services and that it continues to appoint on merit, through fair and open competition.

Commissioners continue to foster good relationships with colleagues in the NICS through the delivery of their statutory functions, including the chairing of Senior Civil Service (SCS) recruitment competitions. We were pleased to be involved in piloting new recruitment methodology in SCS recruitment competitions during the year to try to attract the best candidates for key posts.

My thanks go to colleagues in People & OD and NICS HR with whom we meet regularly to help drive forward recruitment and selection policy while maintaining the Merit Principle. The Recruitment and Selection Development Group has provided a forum for consultation and discussion on many excellent recruitment and selection related initiatives. These include an HR policy review, Phase 2 of the Jobstart Scheme, Recruitment advertising, ring-fencing of posts for people with a disability and Internal Staff Mobility. My fellow Commissioner, Lesley Carroll, also served on a working group set up to review the NICS Policy on Reasonable Adjustments. We look forward to working collaboratively with our NICS colleagues to support the delivery of the 2024-25 People Plan.

The above activities complement the Audit and Engagement work which Commissioners routinely undertake with the help and co-operation of the NICS and its operational partner, HR Connect, to deliver their statutory role of maintaining the Merit Principle through fair and open competition. This important work is covered in detail in the following pages.

Our focus on diversity and inclusion intensified during this period too. We continued to engage with our colleagues in the NICS on diversity and inclusion and were delighted to learn of the progress on their D&I Strategy and of the plethora of excellent initiatives delivered by the various NICS Champions and Staff Networks.

While we assert in our Recruitment Principles that diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity are central to the Merit Principle and should be embraced fully in recruitment to the NICS, a number of vacancies inspired us to think about how we could further promote diversity in our own workplace. I was delighted to sign the Diversity Mark Charter in December 2023, reinforcing our commitment to diversity and inclusivity and encouraging reflection on our own internal practices. We look forward to exploring how we can improve these, with a view to seeking bronze accreditation in 2024-25.

Civil Service Commissioners for NI had a branding makeover in 2023-24, adopting a refreshed look, logo and colour scheme.

This was showcased in the publication of the 2022-23 Annual Report and has since been extended to all of our publications.

At the end of March 2024, Commissioners launched a new and accessible website, on which we are pleased to provide our key documents in an easy read format. We will continue to make our documents as accessible as possible in the future.

Commissioners hosted a number of exploratory workshops to support their knowledge and skills development. In spring 2023, we met with representatives from Disability Action and the National Autistic Society NI to hear about barriers to recruitment for people with a disability. In autumn 2023, we met with the NICS Race and Ethnicity Champion, the Equality Commission and other expert contributors to talk about the underrepresentation of ethnic minority groups in the NICS and the importance of role models and allies. These sessions help develop Commissioners' understanding of the lived experiences of underrepresented groups and we have learned how simple changes made to policies and practices, aimed at benefitting minority groups, actually benefit everyone.



Commissioners and the Secretariat further engaged with counterparts in the UK and Ireland during visits to both Dublin and London. These learning experiences are covered in more detail later in this Report and we look forward to reciprocal visits to Northern Ireland in 2024-25 from the First (UK) Commissioner and from representatives from the Commission for Public Service Appointments.

My colleagues and I look forward with optimism to an interesting year ahead, and to strengthening the positive relationships we already enjoy with the Head of the Civil Service (HOCS), her departmental Permanent Secretaries and NICSHR/People & OD.

I hope you find this Annual Report useful and informative. For more information on the work of Commissioners, please visit our website at www.nicscommissioners.org or contact the Secretariat who will be happy to assist.

DEIRDRE TONER
CHAIRPERSON

THE ROLE OF COMMISSIONERS

Who are the Civil Service Commissioners?

Commissioners are independent of the NICS and this is fundamental to their role. As senior managers from the private, public and voluntary sectors, they bring a wide range of experience from diverse backgrounds, careers and interests to the position. Commissioners are free from personal and political patronage and uphold the core values of the Civil Service, namely integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality. Commissioners are recruited through public advertisement in a fair and open recruitment competition.

Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland are appointed by Royal Warrant to uphold the principle that appointments to posts in the NICS should be on merit. This principle, known as the Merit Principle, is the basis of fair and open competition.

In order to uphold the Merit Principle, Commissioners set out in their Strategic Plan 2020-2025 that they will safeguard an impartial and independent Northern Ireland Civil Service by maintaining the principle of selection on merit.

Commissioners will achieve this by:

- ▶ Prescribing and publishing a Recruitment Code and ensuring it remains fit for purpose;
- ▶ Prescribing in General Regulations the permitted exceptions to the Merit Principle;
- ▶ Responding to requests to make appointments under permitted exceptions to the Merit Principle (where the Recruitment Code expressly provides that written approval is required);
- ▶ Providing approval for appointments to the Senior Civil Service and chairing SCS recruitment competitions;
- ▶ Auditing NICS recruitment policies and practices to establish whether the Recruitment Code is being observed;
- ▶ Seeking assurance that all civil servants are recruited on the basis of fair and open recruitment;
- ▶ Requiring the publication of NICS recruitment related information, including the use of permitted exceptions; and
- ▶ Engaging with the NICS and relevant stakeholders.

The Strategic Plan is underpinned by annual Business Plans which set out in more detail how the Commissioners' vision and priorities will be delivered.

While internal transfer and/or promotion are outside the remit of Commissioners, the broad principles set out in Commissioners' Recruitment Code reflect good practice and Commissioners consider they are applicable equally to internal appointments in order to safeguard the Merit Principle.

In addition, Commissioners also have a role in considering and determining appeals made by existing civil servants under the [NICS Code of Ethics](#).

COMMISSIONERS' STATUTORY AUDIT FUNCTION

Commissioners' determine if the Recruitment Code is being observed using:

- ▶ Mandated monitoring and reporting requirements for the NICS;
- ▶ An evidence-based assurance framework;
- ▶ Commissioners' Annual Audit Plan;
- ▶ Commissioners' Article 6 Approval Process; and
- ▶ Audit Engagement with the NICS.

Mandated Monitoring and Reporting Requirements for the NICS

Under Appendix C of the Recruitment Code, Commissioners require:

- (a) evidence to provide assurance that systems are in place in the NICS to ensure that selection for appointment is made in accordance with the Recruitment Code;
- (b) evidence to provide assurance that recruitment policies and practices in the NICS are subject to regular internal monitoring;
- (c) details of the appointments made under Regulation 3 (Exceptions) of the Commissioners' General Regulations 2007;
- (d) statistical summaries, in a format which the Commissioners may specify, of all recruitment activity during the publication period, including analyses by all categories covered by Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998;
- (e) any actions or initiatives undertaken in the reporting year to attract candidates, and advance a recruitment-related agenda for diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity and which specifically target areas of underrepresentation;
- (f) a report on the outcomes as a result of any such actions or initiatives referred to at (e) above; and
- (g) any other relevant information in a specified format regarding recruitment and selection as Commissioners may require.

The NICS has published this information, which Commissioners have scrutinised, in the [Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report 2023](#) and the [Analysis of Recruitment to the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023](#) report.



Evidence-based Assurance Framework

Commissioners require the Department of Finance (DoF) Permanent Secretary to sign off the annual 'Permanent Secretary Statement of Compliance on Recruitment'. This confirms adherence to the Commissioners' Recruitment Code for all appointments made to NICS Departments during the annual reporting period, bolstering the evidence-based assurance framework and strengthening formal accountability at the most senior levels within the NICS.

The assurance framework is managed by the NICS and is comprised of the following key components:

- ▶ Regular reviews of external competitions;
- ▶ Monitoring of exceptional appointments and extensions to merit lists;
- ▶ Assurance statements signed by HRConnect and Competition Leads when running an external competition;
- ▶ Annual assurances from all Grade 7s within NICS resourcing teams;
- ▶ Annual confirmation from Permanent Secretaries/Accounting Officers that all appointments have been managed by NICS resourcing teams, and that exceptions to merit have been reported; and
- ▶ Assurance that equality monitoring has been carried out on all competitions which closed to appointments during 2023; that the NICS competition monitoring processes include comparative analysis between actual and potential applicant pools; and that findings are used to inform the NICS' programme of outreach activity to encourage under-represented groups to apply.

The above evidence is collated by the NICS and provided to the DoF Permanent Secretary for consideration. If satisfied, the DoF Permanent Secretary issues the annual Statement of Compliance to Commissioners.

Commissioners have received the signed statement from the DoF Permanent Secretary confirming adherence to the Commissioners' Recruitment Code for all appointments made to NICS Departments during 2023.

Commissioners' Audit Plan 2023-24

Audit of Article 6 Assurance Process

Commissioners carried out an audit of the Article 6 Approval Process for two competitions for SCS appointments. The audit found evidence that the majority of assurances were in order and Commissioners were satisfied that the Article 6 Approval Process was operating in accordance with their requirements. Two minor administrative issues were noted in one competition (relating to record keeping) and recommendations made accordingly. The NICS accepted these recommendations and provided assurance that the issues would be addressed.

Audit of competitions below SCS

Commissioners carried out an audit of nine competitions below SCS (one from each department). The purpose of the audit was to examine the application of the Recruitment Code to ensure that the selection processes used in the competitions, and the manner in which they were deployed in practice, were consistent with upholding the Merit Principle. The audit found evidence of a proactive approach to implementation of the Merit Principle in the areas of attracting candidates, assessment, selection and appointment processes, training, communication and management and quality assurance arrangements.

Commissioners noted evidence demonstrating that the NICS had addressed a number of Commissioners' previous audit recommendations.

Commissioners identified some areas where they would like to see improvement to enhance compliance with their Recruitment Code, namely:

- ▶ The availability of records for audit to confirm that the job description and job eligibility requirements have been reviewed, quality assured and agreed;
- ▶ Ensuring that the practice for recording justifications for significantly shorter/longer interviews conforms to NICS policy;
- ▶ Greater care taken over the structure of questions and information for candidates on the interview; and
- ▶ Confirmation of dates of panel training to be sent to HRConnect for retention with competition papers.

Commissioners discussed their recommendations in these areas with the NICS as part of their routine Audit and Engagement activity. Subsequently, the formal management response was received.

The NICS accepted all recommendations and outlined the actions that will be taken to address them.

Commissioners' Article 6 Approval Process

During 2023 Commissioners chaired all SCS competitions and, based on their own participation and the written assurances provided to Commissioners by HRConnect at each stage of the recruitment process, concluded that each competition was managed and progressed in accordance with the requirements of the Recruitment

Code. Accordingly, and in line with the requirements of Article 6 of the Civil Service Commissioners (NI) Order 1999, Commissioners gave written approval for appointments to the SCS to be made from these competitions. Details of the competitions chaired can be found later in this Report.

Audit and Engagement with the NICS during 2023-24

Commissioners also exercise their statutory audit role through:

- ▶ Structured audit and engagement meetings with the NICS to examine a range of recruitment issues, supported by:-
 - Dedicated audit and review meetings for Commissioners, allowing for detailed consideration of audit matters; and
 - Operational meetings between the Secretariat and NICS resourcing staff, to progress and monitor audit and review action points.

Commissioners examined a range of recruitment issues under the engagement process with the NICS, including an outstanding action point from their 2021-22 Review of NICS processes for Managing and Monitoring the tenure of Secondments.

The NICS accepted their recommendation on assurance statements regarding exceptions to merit leading to the NICS and Departmental Permanent Secretaries now providing the assurance that exceptions to merit are made in accordance with the requirements of the Recruitment Code.

Has the Recruitment Code been observed?

Commissioners' 2023-24 Audit & Review Opinion

It is Commissioners' opinion that based on the information available, the NICS recruitment and selection practices are in keeping with the requirements set out in the Recruitment Code.

Commissioners' Audit Plan 2024-25

Annual Audit Plans set out the scheduled audit topics for the year ahead and will be reported on each year in the Commissioners' Annual Report. For 2024-25, Commissioners' audit and review will cover:

- ▶ Review of Key Stages of Recruitment Competitions below SCS;
- ▶ Review of Secondments below SCS (Exception to Merit, Regulation 3(a)); and
- ▶ Audit of the Article 6 Approval Process for SCS appointments.



SENIOR CIVIL SERVICE AUTHORISATION PROCESS

All appointments to the SCS made through open competition require the approval of Commissioners as set out in Article 6 of the Civil Service Commissioners (NI) Order 1999. The statutory duty placed upon Commissioners to ensure that the principle of selection on merit on the basis of fair and open competition is maintained can best be discharged by Commissioners chairing all open SCS competitions. In addition, Commissioners' Article 6 Approval Process requires a number of assurances from HRConnect in relation to the competition process.

In support of the request for approval of appointments under the Article 6 Approval Process, relevant recruitment information is provided by HRConnect to Commissioners at four key stages of the SCS recruitment process.

During this year Commissioners approved 15 appointments. These are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Senior Civil Service Competitions completed during 2023-24

POST	LEAD NICS DEPARTMENT
Deputy Chief Veterinary Officer (Grade 5) (2 appointments)	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Director of Ordnance Survey (Grade 5)	Department of Finance
Deputy Head of Legal Services (Grade 3)	Department of Finance
Assistant Chief Inspector (Grade 5)	Department of Education
Assistant Solicitor (Grade 5)	Department of Finance (appointment to Crown Solicitor's Office)
Assistant Solicitor (Grade 5) (3 appointments)	Department of Finance
Director of Safer Communities (Grade 3)	Department of Justice
Director of NI Courts & Tribunal Service (Grade 3)	Department of Justice
Director of Regional Planning, Governance and Legislation (Grade 5)	Department for Infrastructure
Chief Executive of Northern Ireland Environment Agency (Grade 3)	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Permanent Secretary	Department for the Economy
Chief Veterinary Officer	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs



APPOINTMENTS MADE BY WAY OF EXCEPTION TO MERIT

There may be particular circumstances where exceptions to the Merit Principle are justified.

Regulation 3 of Commissioners' General Regulations 2007 permits appointments to be made other than in accordance with the Merit Principle in the following circumstances:

- a) Where the person is appointed on secondment;
- b) Where the person to be appointed holds a situation in another Civil Service of the Crown;
- c) Where the person to be appointed is, or has recently been, employed on functions which have been or are being transferred to the Crown;
- d) Where the person to be appointed is of proven distinction and exceptional reasons relating to the business needs of the Civil Service provide justification for the appointment;
- e) Where the person has been selected for an appointment under Government programmes or initiatives; and
- f) Where the person has previously held a situation in the Civil Service and is being reinstated (this provision may be used only to reinstate former civil servants following a period of parliamentary candidature or membership).

Further details on these exceptions are provided in Commissioners' Recruitment Code.

Commissioners' objective in permitting exceptions is to provide flexibility where it can be justified as necessary and appropriate to meet the business needs of the NICS.

The Recruitment Code permits Departments to make certain appointments via exception to merit. Departments must adhere to the specific guidance in the Recruitment Code in relation to each exception. The specific approval of Commissioners is required for the following:

- ▶ SCS appointments (all Regulations);
- ▶ Extension of secondments beyond 3 years under Regulation 3(a);
- ▶ Appointments under Regulation 3(d); and
- ▶ Approval of government schemes or initiatives under Regulation 3(e) and any requests to make appointments permanent following completion of a temporary scheme or initiative.

Commissioners consider NICS requests for appointments to be made by way of exception to the Merit Principle on a case-by-case basis and all requests must be submitted via NICSHR. Departments must justify to Commissioners why it is not reasonably practicable to make the appointment in accordance with the Merit Principle, in order that Commissioners may be satisfied that appointment by exception is warranted, and Commissioners will seek further information to aid their decision-making process if appropriate.

Commissioners require NICSHR to manage and monitor all appointments made by way of exception to merit under Regulation 3 and to publish details of these appointments each year in their Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report. As previously noted, Departmental Permanent Secretaries are also required to provide an annual assurance statement that all appointments have been managed by NICSHR resourcing teams and that exceptions to merit have been reported, thereby ensuring that the correct processes, as required by the Recruitment Code, are applied. Exceptions to Merit may also be subject to audit by Commissioners as part of their Annual Audit Plan.

The number of appointments made by the NICS under each of the Exception to Merit categories for the last three calendar years is detailed in Table 2. These include appointments where approval to appoint was given by Commissioners. It should be noted that the information is presented by the NICS by calendar year (to align with the suite of reports on NICS human resource statistics which are produced annually by NISRA), whereas Commissioners' Annual Report relates to the period 1 April – 31 March.

Table 2: Appointments made by the NICS by way of Exception to Merit: January 2021 – December 2023¹

Exception Category	Appointments 2021	Appointments 2022	Appointments 2023
a) Secondment	20	33	15
b) Transfer from another civil service of the Crown	0	0	1
c) Transfer of persons employed on functions being transferred	0	0	0
d) Exceptional needs of the NICS	1	0	1
e) Appointments made under Government initiatives/ programmes	0	50 ²³	29
f) Reinstatement	0	0	0
Total	21	83	46

1 This information is sourced from the Recruitment to the NICS Annual Reports 2021 – 2023

2 15 paid work experience placements (six to nine months) were taken up by disabled young people under the JobStart scheme; permanent posts were subsequently identified for nine of these participants.

3 In 2022, Commissioners gave approval for a Civil Service Skills Academy pilot to be launched under Regulation 3(e). The pilot was aimed at people with Level 5 or higher qualifications, who were unemployed, underemployed or seeking to retrain, and who, on successful completion of the Skills Academy, would be guaranteed a job interview at either Staff Officer or Deputy Principal grade for posts within DfE or TEO. The Academy focused on areas where skills gaps had been identified within DfE and TEO - project management, policy development and machinery of government/governance. 35 participants (18 SO and 17 DP) took up post in 2022 and 29 participants (14 SO and 15 DP) took up post in 2023.

Commissioners publish details of the appointments they give approval for in their own Annual Report each year. During 2023-24, following requests made by NICSHR on behalf of departments, Commissioners gave approval for appointments to be made under the following regulations:

Regulation 3(a) where the person is appointed on secondment

Commissioners gave approval for one appointment and the extension of two appointments at SCS level.

Below SCS, Commissioners gave approval for extensions to secondments for one post at Grade 6, and two at Grade 7.

Regulation 3(d) where the person to be appointed is of proven distinction and exceptional reasons relating to the business needs of the Civil Service provide justification for the appointment

Commissioners gave approval for four temporary appointments at SCS level.



NICS CODE OF ETHICS

One of the Commissioners' statutory roles is to hear appeals under the NICS Code of Ethics. Commissioners expect that a potential appellant will have exhausted the internal departmental procedures, that any ongoing investigation will be completed and the outcome known before they make a determination on whether a Code of Ethics concern will be accepted as an appeal for investigation.

The NICS is required to provide annually the number of concerns dealt with by departments under the Code of Ethics.

The NICS reported that, during the calendar year, two concerns were received and accepted under the NICS Code of Ethics. Each concern was dealt with by the relevant department with one being concluded and one currently ongoing.

During the reporting period, Commissioners received correspondence from one individual who wished to raise a concern under the NICS Code of Ethics. After initial consideration, Commissioners concluded the concern did not meet the eligibility criteria for acceptance as an appeal.

The Civil Service Commissioners' Guidance on Raising a Concern under the NICS Code of Ethics can be viewed on Commissioners' website [Guidance on Raising a Concern under the NICS Code of Ethics](#). This clearly sets out the eligibility criteria and the process that Commissioners will follow when considering appeals from existing Civil Servants.

NICS RECRUITMENT ACTIVITY

Article 4(5) of the Civil Service Commissioners (NI) Order 1999 and Appendix C of the Commissioners' Recruitment Code requires the NICS to publish a wide range of information and statistical summaries in relation to recruitment to the NICS. These requirements are set out on pages 27-30 of this report.

The NICS published its recruitment-related information for the calendar year of 2023⁴ in the [Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report 2023](#) and the [Analysis of NICS Competitions 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2023](#) report.

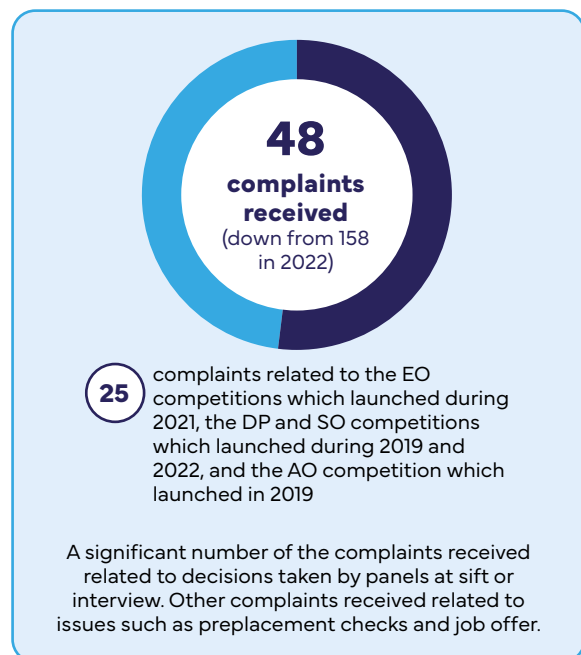
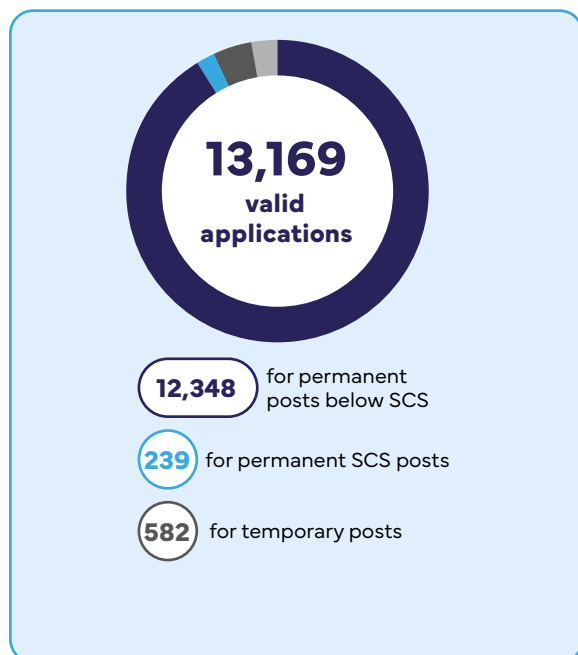
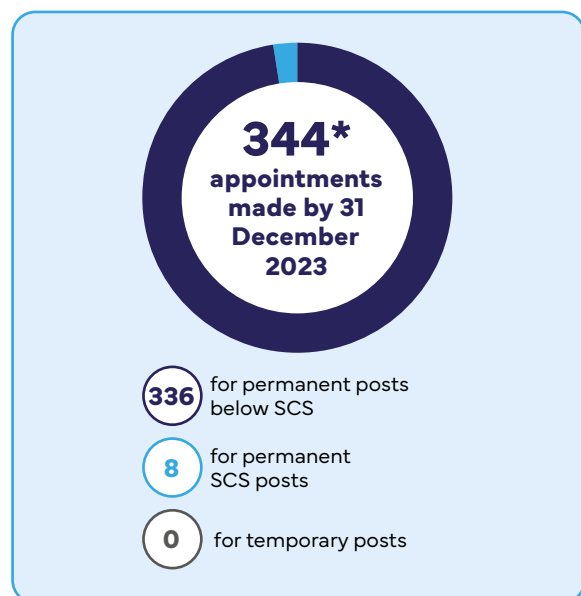
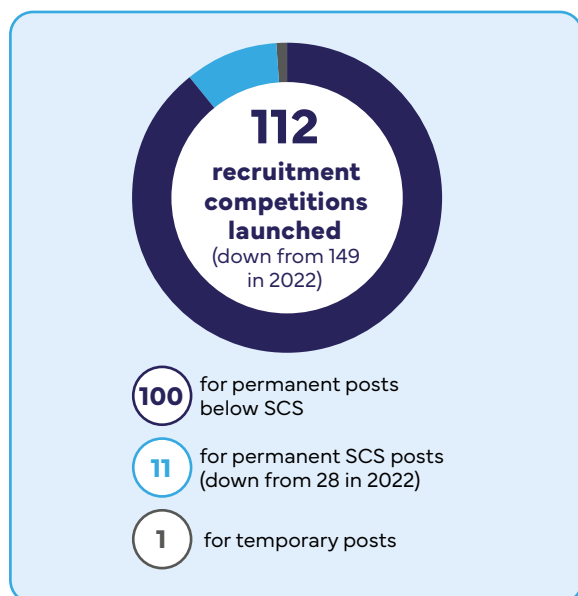
Each year Commissioners determine how the information published in these reports fulfils Article 4(5) of the Civil Service Commissioners (NI) Order 1999 as set out in Appendix C of the Recruitment Code.

4 NICS recruitment related data is reported on a calendar year basis in line with other NICS human resource statistics.

Recruitment Activity during 2023

The [Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report 2023](#) provides information on recruitment activity which took place during 2023, including appointments made by Exceptions to Merit and recruitment related assurances which are detailed elsewhere in Commissioners' Annual Report.

Key Facts:



* further appointments will be made during the lifetime of the competitions

Internal Competitions

While Commissioners have no regulatory role in relation to internal competitions, they consider that it provides context and a helpful comparative perspective to publish this information alongside the open recruitment data. NICS internal recruitment competitions and appointment figures for 2021 to 2023 are therefore detailed in **Table 3** below.

One of the 23 internal competitions held during 2023 was for an SCS position but no appointment had been made by 31 December 2023.

Commissioners continue to encourage the NICS to address diversity issues within the NICS through open competition wherever possible, whilst being mindful of the unprecedented financial pressures departments face.

Commissioners welcome the stated aspiration of the NICS to move towards external recruitment and selection as a default position for the SCS.

Table 3: NICS Internal Recruitment Competitions and Appointment Figures 2021 to 2023

Detail	2021	2022	2023
Internal Competitions	82	13	23
Internal Appointments	317	83	42

Agency Workers

Commissioners have noted the steady increase in the percentage of workers in the NICS who are agency workers as compared to NICS employees. As reported in the [Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report 2023](#), the number of agency workers temporarily assigned to the NICS increased by approximately 23% from the previous year i.e. 3,662 in 2023 compared to 2,982 in 2022.

The NICS has reported that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which absorbs the cost of agency workers who carry out work on their behalf, employs approximately

39% of all agency workers in the NICS. The increased use of agency workers in recent years is due to a number of factors including: a temporary pause on the recruitment of permanent staff; the need to deliver work carried out on behalf of the DWP within agreed targets; and continuing temporary pressures arising from EU Exit and Covid.

Commissioners are pleased to see that over 100 NICS recruitment competitions are underway, to assist with future reduction in the reliance on recruitment agency workers.

Key Developments and Initiatives during 2023

Commissioners meet regularly with the NICS to discuss key issues related to recruitment and selection and to keep abreast of development within the NICS. Key developments and initiatives in relation to recruitment and selection, have been published in the [Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report 2023](#), including:

- ▶ An Apprenticeship policy to provide a policy framework and guidance to support apprenticeships in the NICS. It is hoped that the policy can be finalised with a view to implementation during 2024-25;
- ▶ A review of recruitment advertising in the NICS to allow greater flexibility on the choice and use of advertising channels in recruitment, to maximise advertising reach and deliver better value for money. Responses from consultation are being considered and publication of the consultation report will follow in 2024;
- ▶ An evaluation of the Guaranteed Interview Scheme (GIS), which was launched in January 2022. This evaluation covers external competitions which closed to applications during 2022 and has been prepared using data provided by NISRA. Initial findings indicate that the GIS operated in 96 out of the 141 external competitions

that closed to applications during 2022, with 955 out of 15,122 (6.3%) applicants applying under GIS. The scheme does not guarantee a job, but it is intended to ensure a guaranteed number of disabled applicants, who meet the minimum essential eligibility criteria for the role they have applied for, are offered an interview; and

- ▶ Work to develop draft policy on a Ring-Fencing Scheme (RFS) for disabled applicants is advancing and engagement on operational processes to support implementation has commenced with a view to implementing the new RFS policy during 2024-25. Ring-fencing guarantees an offer of appointment to a minimum number of disabled applicants who have demonstrated, through the relevant selection process, that they meet the required standard for appointment.

The NICS has also reported significant diversity and inclusion activity and dedicated effort continues to be invested in promoting the NICS brand and encouraging people to consider a career in the NICS. A significant number of work placements were facilitated during the year for students in schools, further education colleges and universities as well as those not in education. Four apprenticeship competitions were also launched.

Statistical Summaries of Recruitment Competitions

The **Analysis of NICS Competitions 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023**

is an Official Statistics publication, published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). It presents statistical summaries, in a format which has been agreed with Commissioners, of all recruitment competitions which **closed to further activity in 2023** (i.e. no further appointments will be made from the competition) by the equality categories of sex, community background, ethnicity, disability, age group and sexual orientation. It also presents a summary by employment history (current NICS employee, previous NICS employee or no NICS employment history)⁵.

In 2023, 136 permanent recruitment competitions closed to further activity, having attracted 13,553 valid applications. By 31 December 2023, 1,359 appointments had been made from these competitions over the past four years. The competition which attracted the highest volume of applicants was for Staff Officer (4,324 valid applications).

Two competitions also closed for temporary posts (465 valid applications) from which 108 appointments had been made by 31 December 2023.

30 competitions which closed to further activity in 2023 were for Senior Civil Service jobs, attracting 1006 valid applications. By 31 December 2023, 44 appointments had been made from these competitions. Two Grade 5 competitions attracted no applicants - those for a general service post for Chief Information and Security officer and a general service post for Director of PfG and Strategic Policy.

Data is presented in the **Analysis of NICS Competitions 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023** for all applicants in relation to the categories noted above for the stages of the competitions - eligible applicants, invited to interview, passed interview and appointed. Comparison for each equality category is also provided with the economically active population aged 16-64, using data from the 2021 Census.

5 Following consultation, which included Commissioners, NISRA have amended the format of this report and it now reports on competitions which closed to further activity during the year (i.e. no more appointments can be made from the competition), rather than those which closed to applications.



The **Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report 2023** provides useful summaries of the NISRA data in collated form. Appendix 2, Table 1 (page 53) provides a summary of eligible applicants by Equality Group for competitions which closed to activity during 2023. This is broken down by Non SCS Permanent Jobs, SCS Permanent Jobs and Temporary Jobs. Appendix 2, Table 2 (page 54) provides a summary of eligible applicants invited to interview, passed interview and appointed by Equality Group for competitions closed to activity during 2023.

COMMISSIONERS' ENGAGEMENT

Commissioners value the opportunity to develop and foster effective relationships with stakeholders as this facilitates the mutual sharing of experience, expertise, innovation and best practice.

In addition to Commissioners' links to the Head of the Civil Service and the NICS Permanent Secretaries, Commissioners also work closely with their counterparts in other jurisdictions to explore issues of mutual interest.

Engagement with the NICS

During 2023-24, Commissioners had the privilege of working with the HOCS and the NICS Board, including its recently appointed Non-Executive Directors, not least in their role of chairing SCS recruitment competitions.

At their Annual Meeting in June 2023, they discussed:

- ▶ The Renewal framework;
- ▶ The Impact of the economic crisis on the NICS and particularly on recruitment;
- ▶ The aspiration that recruitment should be external by default;
- ▶ Recruitment methods.



Commissioners also met with Neil Gibson, Department of Finance Permanent Secretary, on the delivery of NICS recruitment services.

Following the introduction of the Windsor Framework/Command Paper on “Safeguarding the Union”, Commissioners met with:

- ▶ The Permanent Secretary of DAERA and colleagues in the Department of Finance to discuss the potential impact of recent developments on the application of the NICS Code of Ethics, in the context of Commissioners’ role of hearing appeals under that Code; and
- ▶ The Northern Ireland Office Permanent Secretary about the movement of civil servants between jurisdictions, in the context of their role in approving appointments under Exceptions to the Merit principle, as laid out in Commissioners’ General Regulations 2007.

During 2023-24, Commissioners continued to work closely with NICS colleagues on a day to day basis, for example, in the processing of requests for approval to make appointments by Exception to Merit and in chairing SCS recruitment competitions.

They also collaborated on policy development with colleagues in NICSHR and People & OD, predominantly via the Recruitment and Selection Development Group. This Group had originally been set up to address recommendations arising from a range of reports, including the NIAO Report on Capacity and Capability in the NICS (2020). It met four times in 2023-24 and has evolved into a useful forum for engagement on policy matters associated with Recruitment and Selection.

During the course of the year, the Group focused on:



Conflict of Interest Policy



Use of Merit Lists



Guaranteed Interview Scheme



Ringfencing of Posts



Reasonable adjustments



Graduate Management Programme



Internal Mobility



NICS Recruitment Advertising



Benchmarking activity



JobStart Scheme



Consideration of Jobstart Phase 2



Vacancies and the use of temporary promotions



DWP job opportunities for Northern Ireland



Pilot methodology for recruitment to SCS posts



Commissioners met with the NICS to discuss the provisions in their Recruitment Code on the Ministerial Role in appointments to a small number of SCS posts. This led to the revision of their Recruitment Code (v.15) and the addition of a footnote which clarifies:

Where there are no Ministers in post to fulfil the discretionary functions available to them in this Code (e.g. in the absence of a functioning Executive or should the executive cease to function at any point during a competition), and except where

appointing legislation requires otherwise, all stages of the recruitment process to make an appointment to the position of HOCS, Permanent Secretary or other, will continue to be progressed without Ministerial involvement.

Commissioners continue to meet with People & OD representatives annually on progress in promoting Diversity and Inclusion in the NICS.

Engagement with the UK Civil Service Commission



Commissioners and members of the Secretariat visited the UK Civil Service Commission at its offices in London, on 11 September 2023. They met with First Commissioner, Baroness Gisela Stuart, and discussed matters of mutual interest, including Ministerial involvement in recruitment decisions and management of high volume applications for SCS posts.

They attended the Commission's quarterly Board meeting, contributed to the debate on a range of live issues and participated in a scheduled professional development session on

Commissioners and members of the Secretariat visited the UK Civil Service

"Panel Reports – What Are They For?" facilitated by Janette Durbin, Director for Civil Service Talent.

Subsequent to the meeting in London, Commissioners invited Janette and Andrew Kean to an online meeting on 26 October 2023 to discuss the effectiveness of the Success Profiles model and Values based recruitment in the UK Civil Service.

Commissioners hope to build on these networking opportunities to share new ideas and best practice in the future and look forward to hosting Baroness Gisela Stuart and Kate Owen, Chief Executive, during a reciprocal visit to Belfast in September 2024.



Engagement with the Commission for Public Service Appointments

In June 2023, Commissioners met with the Chief Executive and members of the Commission for Public Service Appointments (CPSA) in Dublin, and were joined by colleagues in the Public Appointments Service (PAS).

Commissioners were apprised of:

- ▶ Changes in recruitment practices for appointing to senior roles in the Republic of Ireland’s public sector;
- ▶ Benchmarking activity;
- ▶ A pilot scheme to provide meaningful and useful feedback to candidates; and

- ▶ Academic work on the “language of recruitment” which identified potentially discriminatory or off-putting terminology in recruitment advertising and candidate information.

They engaged in discussions on:

- ▶ The relative merits of measuring competency to measuring capability and emotional intelligence in recruitment and selection; and
- ▶ Specificity of job roles v generalism and how best to attract expertise in certain areas of work.

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)

During 2023-24, NISRA consulted with users and stakeholders to seek their views on proposed changes to their work, aimed at streamlining activity, whilst minimizing impact on users and stakeholders. This was in response to the financial constraints imposed by the budget settlement for 2023-24.

Commissioners actively engaged with NISRA in the consultation process, particularly in relation to the gathering and presentation of data on recruitment and equality.

They met with a representative from NISRA on several occasions to discuss and review proposals for data presentation which would reduce the NISRA workload while continuing to meet Commissioners’ Appendix C data requirements.

PROMOTING DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND EQUALITY

Commissioners consider diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity to be central to the Merit Principle and, accordingly, they are embedded within Commissioners' Recruitment Principles. Commissioners' Equality Scheme and Disability Action Plan 2022-2027 sets out how their statutory obligations will be fulfilled to promote equality and good relations.

A particular area of interest for Commissioners is ensuring that recruitment to the NICS is as accessible as possible to the people it serves. Commissioners engaged with the Chief Commissioner, Geraldine McGahey, and Chief Executive, Amanda Logan, of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland in January 2024. The meeting provided Commissioners with updates on legislation and recent tribunal cases with regard to disability and employment. Commissioners also heard more about the ongoing work of the Equality Commission; discussed the challenges facing those with disabilities living in Northern Ireland and positive actions in relation to recruitment; and received an update about cases relating to requests for reasonable adjustments in recruitment processes and in the workplace.

The recent pandemic has shown how quickly the workforce can adapt to new ways of working and how technology can break down many barriers that once seemed impossible to navigate. Commissioners are keen that the NICS continues to build adaptability into recruitment and retention strategies across the workplace. Commissioners acknowledge that flexibility, whilst beneficial to many employees, is a key reasonable adjustment that can help people with disabilities access and remain in employment in the NICS.



Commissioners were delighted to be represented by Dr Lesley Carroll on the NICS Working Group set up to review its Reasonable Adjustment Policy in 2023-24. Lesley was able to draw on her experience from working with the Equality Commission and her own life experiences. Commissioners look forward to contributing to debates on other similar policy issues in the future, putting their experience and knowledge to good use.

In order to further their knowledge and understanding of the challenges faced by people from diverse backgrounds, Commissioners have adopted a rolling Research, Learning and Development Plan. The Plan includes actions to reach out to diverse groups, networks and experts to hear about their lived experiences in general and to identify barriers to recruitment in particular, with a view to influencing more inclusive practices in future.

In 2023-24, Commissioners focused on the following areas:

Disability and Neurodiversity

In May 2023, Commissioners hosted a workshop including Nuala Toman and Tommy Cairns from Disability Action and Shirelle Stewart, National Autistic Society NI, to learn more about barriers to employment for people with disabilities and conditions such as Autism and ADHD.

Also in May 2023, Commissioners met with medical practitioner, Dr John Kelly, and entrepreneur, Terence Brannigan, to discuss Dr Kelly's work on "whole brain thinking" and neurodivergence. The work explored the limitations of established recruitment and selection methods in attracting innovators and entrepreneurs.

Ethnicity

In October 2023, Commissioners hosted a workshop on Ethnicity and Racial Equality and met with Alfie Wong, Head of Racial Equality Delivery (TEO) and NICS Diversity Champion for Race; David Johnston, former Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (PSNI) and Diversity Mark buddy; Paul Oakes and Donal Collins, Equality Commission

for Northern Ireland and colleagues in People & Organisational Development (DoF). They discussed barriers to employment generally and recruitment to the NICS for people from different ethnicities and the importance of role models in the workplace, particularly at senior grades.



Learning and Development

Commissioners and the Secretariat participated in a wide range of learning and development initiatives provided by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and other public sector platforms aimed at promoting compliance with Section 75 of the NI Act 1998 and delivering best practice in recruitment and selection.

Commissioners wish to commend the continuing good work of their NICS colleagues in promoting Diversity and Inclusion in the NICS, details of which are contained in their ambitious annual Diversity Action Plans.

They note the impressive range of interventions and the excellent resources provided to make the NICS a welcoming and inclusive environment for all and an employer of choice for prospective candidates to posts in the NICS. These resources include the recently published NICS Guide for Allies and the LGBTQ+ Role Models Guide.

Commissioners look forward to the publication and roll out of the 2024-25 Diversity Action Plan in due course and, inter alia the NICS Neurodiversity Line Manager's Toolkit.

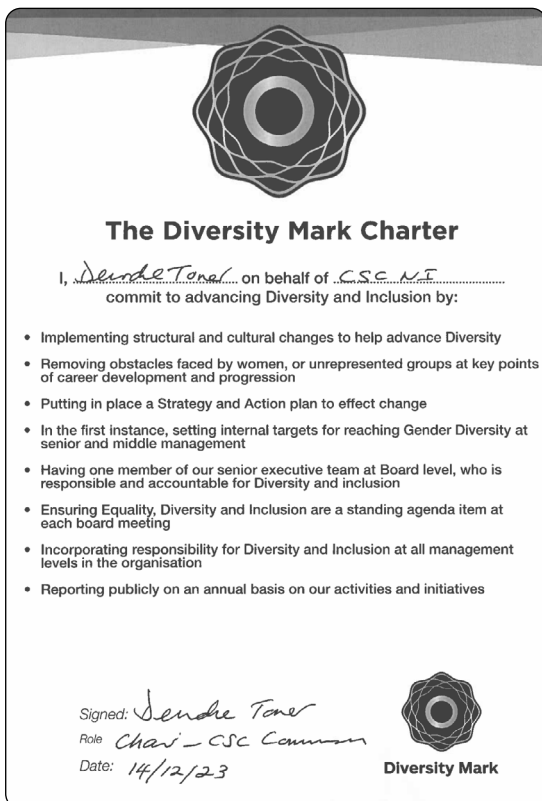
Website

Commissioners were delighted to launch their new website on 27 March 2024. It is intended that the website will be as accessible to as many people as possible and, accordingly, they simultaneously commissioned an accessibility audit, the recommendations of which will be implemented during 2024-25.

Commissioners published two of its key documents in an Easy Read format:

- ▶ Recruitment Code
- ▶ Guidance for Raising a Concern under the NICS Code of Ethics

Diversity Mark



Commissioners have a statutory duty to ensure that appointments to the NICS are made on merit, on the basis of fair and open competition. Commissioners consider that diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity are central to the Merit Principle and their recruitment principles, which should be observed by all those involved in the recruitment process.

Commissioners wish to publicly demonstrate their own corporate commitment to diversity and inclusion and, accordingly, Deirdre Toner, Chairperson, signed the Diversity Mark Charter on behalf of Commissioners and the Secretariat in December 2023 with a view to seeking Bronze Diversity Mark Accreditation by the end of December 2024.

COMMISSIONERS IN POST SINCE APRIL 2023

DEIRDRE TONER **CHAIRPERSON**

Throughout my career I have always believed that one of the most important obligations is to ensure that talented people, from a diverse community have the opportunity to fulfil their potential in a wide range of employment, irrespective of, for example, age, ethnicity, religion, gender or disability. It is vital that recruitment to the NICS is as accessible as possible to the people it serves, creating impartial recruitment and selection to support the long-term structural, economic and societal challenges facing the organisation – in a time of uncertainty and transformation, this is more important than ever before.

As a Civil Service Commissioner, I have the privilege of interviewing some of the brightest and best candidates and I am regularly energised and inspired by their passion and enthusiasm for making a difference to society and by how their skills and ideas can improve the delivery of public services. I strongly believe that by applying the Merit Principle the best person for the position will be appointed.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service is a great place to work, with a huge range of roles and opportunities which can provide the most rewarding career experience.



**Deirdre was appointed
1 June 2018 for a
five year period and
extended for a further 5
years, until May 2028.**

SINÉAD BURNS **COMMISSIONER**

I believe that objective, open, fair and transparent recruitment is essential to maintaining and building public trust in appointments to the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The work of NICS impacts in numerous ways on each person in Northern Ireland and therefore it is imperative that on the basis of merit alone, the best and most talented people are appointed to the NICS.

I passionately believe that any public service should reflect the society it serves, in all of its diversity. NICS has invested significant effort into attracting and recruiting people from a wide range of backgrounds and circumstances. This hard work and vision is to be commended. The development of initiatives such as the JobStart scheme, the Guaranteed Interview Scheme and the Civil Service Skills Academy is to be welcomed and forms a strong foundation for expanding upon this valuable work into the future.



Sinéad was appointed on 8 March 2016 for a five year period and extended for a further 5 years, until 7 March 2026.

DR LESLEY CARROLL
COMMISSIONER

I have always believed in a professional, non-partisan public service where advancement is based solely on merit. As the NICS serves the whole community of people in NI it is important that it reflects the diversity of that community. The core function of the Civil Service Commissioners, to ensure that all appointments are on merit based on fair and open competition, is critical to providing assurance not only to those who work within the NICS but also to wider society. Historically, the Civil Service Commissioners have sought to encourage and support diversity and inclusion initiatives. I am pleased to work within and carry forward that history. My role in recruitment is an opportunity to exercise my commitment to fairness and diversity. The diversity of opportunity within the Civil Service is something to be cherished and it should be reflected by a diverse workforce. Diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity are all central to the Merit Principle and embedded within Commissioners' Recruitment Principles.



Dr Lesley Carroll was appointed on 01 July 2022 for a period of five years, with her appointment ending 30 June 2027.

COMMISSIONERS' SECRETARIAT AND RESOURCES 2023-24

Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland are sponsored by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO).

While Commissioners are afforded the independence to discharge their statutory functions with impartiality, Commissioners' work aligns with the Secretary of State's vision to make Northern Ireland **"a better place to live, work and invest"**.

Commissioners and the Secretariat work with the NIO in accordance with a framework document agreed by both parties. The purpose of the framework document is to ensure that the Commissioners and their Secretariat operate under and comply with good governance arrangements and practice, and meet applicable regulatory requirements and expectations.

The NIO oversees the Secretariat's performance and sets its annual budget. The Secretary has responsibility for ensuring all financial management decision making is in accordance with HM Treasury Guidance on Managing Public Money.

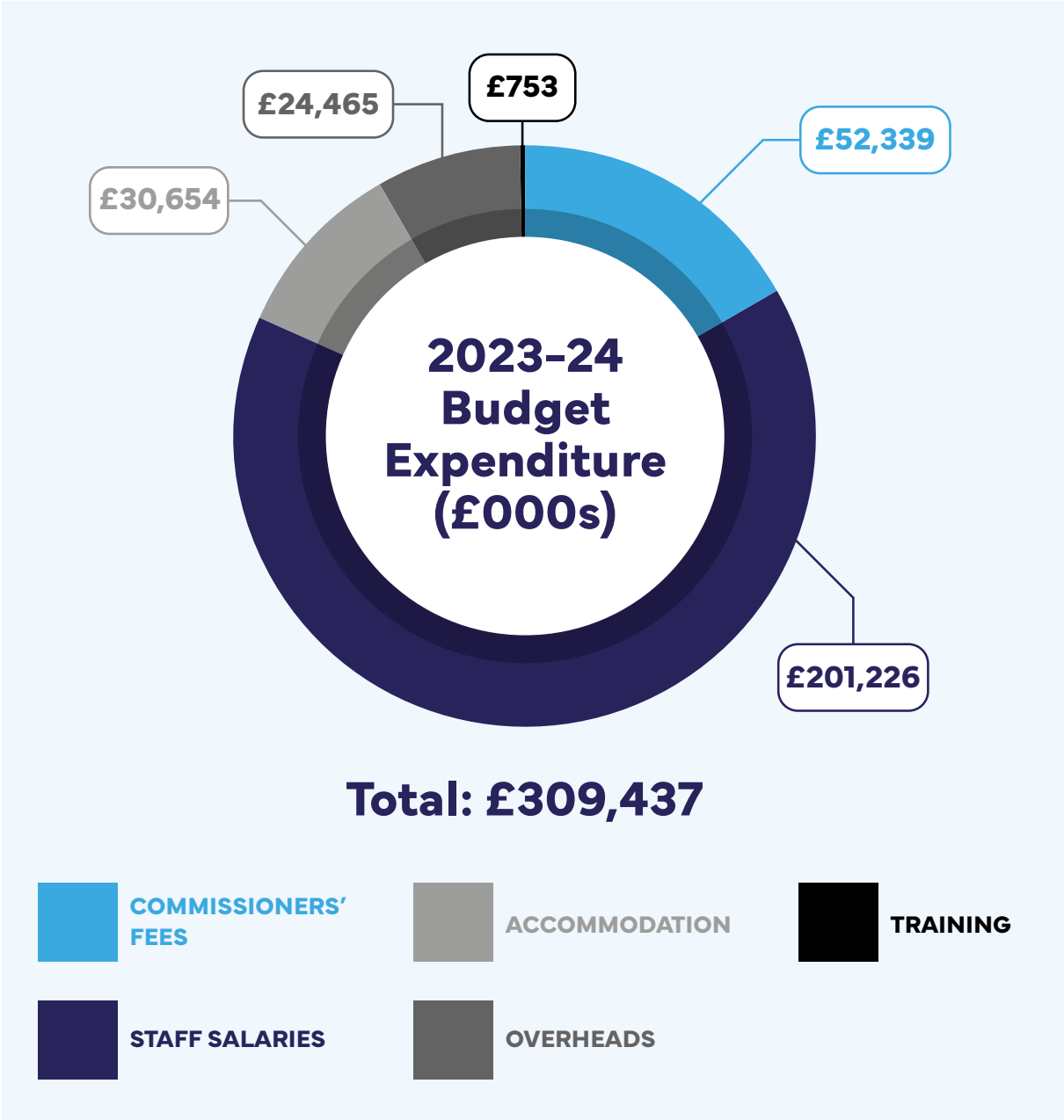
In order to ensure compliance with their responsibilities the Secretariat regularly engaged with the NIO on matters such as governance and policy, financial management and budget forecasting.

To deliver their statutory functions, Commissioners received support from a Secretariat which, in 2023-24, comprised four members of staff, three part-time and one full-time, making up a complement of 3.3 FTE.

Financial pressures across government resulted in budget cuts for the Office of Civil Service Commissioners which necessitated a reduction in the Secretariat's staffing levels from 4.2 FTE in 2022-23 to 3.3 FTE in 2023-24.

Civil Service Commissioners and their Secretariat will continue to seek new and innovative ways to support the delivery of Commissioners' statutory functions whilst ensuring good governance and best practice.

In 2023-24, Commissioners had a budget of approximately £318k. Expenditure was under budget by approximately 2.5%.





WEBSITES AND RESEARCH

The Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland

www.nicscommissioners.org

NICSHR

www.finance-ni.gov.uk/nics-hr

NICS Recruitment

<https://irecruit-ext.hrconnect.nigov.net/>

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

www.nisra.gov.uk

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

www.equalityni.org

Recruitment to the NICS Annual Report 2023

[NICS Recruitment Annual Report 2023 \(nigov.net\)](http://www.nigov.net)

Analysis of NICS Recruitment Competitions 1 January 2023 – 31 December 2023

www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/analysis-nics-recruitment-competitions-2023

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Feedback

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Whilst this Report is a document of record it is important that it is also relevant and informative to the public. Should you have any comments regarding any aspect of the Report (e.g. content, layout etc.) the Civil Service Commissioners would be happy to receive them. Any such comments should be sent to the following address:

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