



Pivotal written evidence for Finance Committee inquiry into performance and culture of the Northern Ireland Civil Service

Pivotal offers the following initial comments ahead of giving oral evidence to the Committee on 6 May 2026. Our comments and analysis are made briefly here, and can be expanded upon at the Committee session.

Pivotal is the independent think tank for Northern Ireland. Last year, we published a research report titled "[Policy delivery in Northern Ireland](#)" which looked at the challenges to good policy delivery here, based on the findings of 30 research interviews with former ministers, MLAs, SpAds, civil servants, business leaders and VCS representatives. This forms the basis of the following analysis, including some quotes from our interviewees about the NICS, alongside other research and literature on this topic.

Our comments can be categorised into the following themes:

1. Leadership

Our research found that leadership, particularly from the Senior Civil Service, is vital for driving delivery, but all too often political instability means that civil servants' immediate concern is simply "keeping the ship afloat" through various crises. Interviewees pointed to Brexit, Covid, frequent collapses of the Executive and more, which was echoed by [representatives of the NICS Human Resources team at the Finance Committee in March](#). The political context facing Northern Ireland's civil servants is more challenging than in most other jurisdictions: time, energy and resources are used up "just surviving". Our research last year found all of these pressures had left many civil servants "fatigued and dejected".

Nevertheless, there was a clear message in our research about the importance of civil service leadership to drive progress, particularly from the Senior Civil Service. We were given many examples of where strong and consistent SCS leadership of a project had made change happen.

The complexity in lines of authority within the NICS can make providing stable clear leadership harder. Permanent Secretaries are responsible to their ministers, and the Head of the Civil Service (HOCS) has no formal authority over them. Management of the NICS overall sits within the Finance Department, and the NICS Board provides strategic leadership. Our report called for HOCS to be the Senior Responsible Officer for the delivery of the Programme for Government (PfG), with some interviewees suggesting she should be Accounting Officer for the NICS as a whole.

Despite some good progress, other areas of concern highlighted recently in the NIAO report “[Leading and resourcing the Northern Ireland Civil Service](#)” include the 19% growth in senior staff numbers, discontinuity in leadership at senior levels, ongoing high sickness absence, and the continued high median age of NICS staff.

2. Recruitment and skills

Despite the [People Strategy’s](#) ambition for a “right size and shape” NICS, there remain problems with workforce planning, with 5,500 vacancies, 13% of the workforce in temporary promotions, and the use of 5,000 agency workers (on top of an operating workforce of 24,500). The recruitment process is slow, averaging seven months, and our research found an emphasis on filling posts by grade rather than putting the right person in the right role. Recruitment processes need to be streamlined, with a focus on ensuring people have the right skills for the job. The NICS needs to reduce its reliance on temporary promotions, to ensure greater fairness and development opportunities.

The NICS remains, in the words of one of our interviewees, “dominated by the Mandarin generalist”. While our report recognises the value of generalists, there is a need for a “mixed economy” with specialists added into the workforce. The NICS has a shortage of specialists, particularly in digital, data, commercial and AI roles. We also found that there is a hesitancy around the use of secondments and too much reliance on paying external consultants (who one interviewee said “borrow your watch to tell you the time”). Some interviewees, particularly from the VCS, told us that civil servants were too far removed from the real world and that much more connection to how policies were delivered in practice was needed.

Interviewees from business and the voluntary sector pointed out the significant churn generated by frequent job moves, and that this was a barrier to building meaningful relationships with external partners and to effective delivery. This pattern could also give a message to civil servants that staying in a role to acquire deep expertise was not valued. The ongoing work to develop “job families” should help in assisting progressions and creating greater career specialisms. The creation of around 70 new professions in data, digital, engineering, health and social care, operational and project delivery, science and more will be welcome. It is important that this is a core focus of the NICS as it progresses its People Strategy, but we note that recent campaigns continue to recruit large numbers of generalist staff.

3. Culture

Our research found there was huge respect for the abilities, commitment and hard work of civil servants, but that deep cultural issues reduced their effectiveness. The issue mentioned most by our interviewees was risk aversion. Particularly since RHI, the NICS' "risk appetite is in the gutter", meaning things move at a "glacial pace", and process is often valued more highly than achieving outcomes. Detailed attention is paid to whether public money is spent properly, but much less to whether it is effective in delivering outcomes or impact. This risk aversion acts as a significant brake on progress and slows down delivery. One business representative pointed out that "you can't de-risk to zero" and another said the NICS must focus more on outcomes – "the reason for doing this is not just the pound notes, it's actually about changing the place".

This low risk appetite casts doubt over the ability to transform our public services, a PfG priority and something which necessitates new ways of thinking and finding innovative solutions. Deloitte's recent [State of the State report](#) found that there is a "great will to deliver change but not to accept change" when it comes to transformation, and that "it hits a brick wall when you try to get it through the system".

Interestingly, our research found that Civil Servants will sometimes err on the side of caution due to the fear of public scrutiny from the NIAO or Public Accounts Committee. This was echoed in the 'State of the State' report, with one of its interviewees saying "The Public Accounts Committee and NIAO are set up to beat up civil servants".

4. Structures

A striking finding from our research was the extent to which NI departments are siloed, with one interviewee stating that "they're not one government, they're a series of departments". Joined-up working is a core challenge experienced by all governments, which is made more difficult by NI's institutional structures. A lack of communication and co-operation hinders relationship building and the delivery of cross-departmental priorities.

The lack of collective authority over the Executive at a political and administrative level also make it much harder to drive delivery and leadership from the top (see Point 1 above). The First and deputy First Ministers have no formal authority over their Executive colleagues, as a Prime Minister would over his cabinet, for example. The departments, as separate legal entities, are not bound by collective responsibility except where agreed,

such as with the Programme for Government, and even then there is no enforcement mechanism to maintain it.

5. Data and targets

Our research found that the slow processes and “endless checking” within NICS mean that once data is collected and ready to use, it is often already out of date. This makes it much harder for policy and delivery to be meaningfully informed by accurate data that reflects the reality on the ground. Data sharing between and within departments can be a challenge. A greater emphasis on the data profession may help with some of these issues. The use of targets within strategies and policies can help set direction and drive accountability, but our research found that civil servants often fear creating “hostages to fortune” through them.

Data about the NICS itself is sometimes lacking, which is reflected in the Deloitte’s ‘State of the State’ report – “robustness of performance management procedures is not clear”. Both the [2020](#) and 2026 NIAO reports found that a tiny minority of civil servants’ performance was rated “unsatisfactory”, although the NICS is reviewing the effectiveness of a binary satisfactory/unsatisfactory rating. Workforce productivity is not formally measured in the NICS – a properly structured measurement approach would help ensure the service is the right size and staffed appropriately. The NICS, in conjunction with NISRA, are looking into the reasons behind the high levels of sickness absence. It is welcome to hear that the NICS Board are provided with a RAG review at each meeting about People Strategy progress, as well as an end-of-year report, two year roadmap and departmental dashboards with HR data. These should assist in ensuring delivery and accountability.

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