



Northern Ireland Office

Audit Report

April 2025

Contents

Executive Summary	3
Profile	3
Audit Findings	4
Good Practice	4
Areas for Improvement	4
Queries Raised	4
Breaches of the Recruitment Principles	4
Exceptions	4
Exception 1 Usage	4
Diversity, Innovation and SCS Recruitment	5
Diversity	5
Innovation	5
SCS Recruitment (including External by Default)	5
Conclusions and Recommendations	5
Management Action Plan	5
Moderation Meeting	6
Audit Rating	6
Our Classification Systems	7

Executive Summary

The Civil Service Commission audits organisations to drive greater innovation and improvement in departmental practice, while ensuring the important principle of recruitment on merit, after fair and open competition remains the cornerstone of an effective and impartial Civil Service.

The new audit programme better reflects the differences in scale and the challenge of recruitment within the different departments and organisations that the CSC regulates.

For each audit the Commission requests evidence on six campaigns, with each to include records related to:

- o the job advert;
- o the candidate pack;
- o the sift records (with scores);
- o the interview questions;
- o the interview scores (with feedback);
- o the appointment; and
- o the chair / panel report.

and:

- requests evidence on six exceptions;
- issues a questionnaire related to diversity, innovation and SCS recruitment;
- identifies areas of concern; potential breaches to the Recruitment Principles; and clarifying evidence from the organisation required for the interim audit;
- discusses the above with each organisation at an audit meeting;
- moderates the final report with Civil Service Commissioners including, where relevant, the department's Link Commissioner;
- issues the Final Audit Report with the audit rating to the organisation; and
- follows up recommendations with the organisation to ensure the actions have been addressed.

Profile

The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) is a ministerial department ensuring the smooth working of the devolution settlement in Northern Ireland. NIO is supported by four agencies and public bodies

- **Headcount:** 160 (November 2024)
- **Appointments:** 38 (last four quarters)
- **Exceptions:** 0 (last four quarters)
- **SCS1+2 / Commissioner-led competitions:** 2/0 (last four quarters)

NIO's audit was in November 2024.

NIO's Complexity Score is 1. This reflects a standard score for the smallest departments with a focused remit. NIO was content with this score. NIO engaged positively throughout the audit process.

Audit Findings

The audit reviewed six campaigns.

Good Practice

NIO clearly stated the requirements for the statement of suitability, how to write it, and how it would be assessed. Additionally, NIO clearly noted the lead behaviour and provided information in the event of a large number of applications; and provided further information to candidates on expectations of each behaviour at application stage.

Areas for Improvement

NIO should clearly state if and how desirable criteria will be assessed as this was unclear to candidates. Additionally, NIO should clearly reference how experience will be assessed - for example, whether this is associated with the essential and / or desirable criteria.

NIO should ensure interview records show the full outcome of candidates, including those that did not attend.

Queries Raised

For one campaign CSC questioned NIO on their scoring at sift, where all candidates scored a '2', but there was not a clear distinction who would be selected for interview and who would not. NIO could not provide a clear explanation. CSC issued a Serious breach under the Fair principle.

Breaches of the Recruitment Principles

One Serious breach was identified in the audit related to treating candidates unfairly. NIO could not clearly explain why all candidates scoring 2 were not all selected for an interview.

Five Technical breaches were identified in the audit. Three Technical breaches related to advertised criteria not being assessed. These related to human error on misleading assessment criteria; lack of clarity on scoring specific elements of the assessment criteria; and assessing a CV. Two Technical breaches were for poor record keeping of candidate outcomes.

No breaches were identified outside the audit.

Exceptions

NIO did not use any exceptions in this period.

Exception 1 usage

- **Total (last four quarters):** There was no Exception 1 usage.

Diversity, Innovation and SCS Recruitment

Diversity

NIO has one apprentice on a fixed term contract apprenticeship. There are no limitations to who can apply for apprenticeships.

Innovation

NIO has a Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing action plan. Recruitment sits under the 'representative' strand of the plan. The intention is that this will improve NIO's ability to attract a diverse range of applicants. NIO is doing this by creating a new candidate pack, rewriting NIO's diversity statement and researching tools that could support hiring managers in writing inclusive job descriptions.

SCS Recruitment (including External by Default)

The total number of SCS recruitment within the department conducted via fair and open, based on merit, in the last four quarters was two. No appointments were made to external candidates.

Conclusions and Recommendations

One Serious breach and five Technical breaches recorded inside the audit. No breaches outside the audit.

There were no Exception 1 appointments.

NIO has limited diversity, with just one apprenticeship. However, their Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing action plan may address this going forward.

Two SCS were recruited through a fair and open process.

Management Action Plan

The audit identified three recommendations:

	Recommendations	Priority	Implementation Date
1	NIO should, in relation to the Fair principle, take steps to ensure panels distinguish sift scores to ensure candidates are treated fairly when selected for an interview.		October 2025
2	NIO should take steps to ensure that candidates are provided with greater information in relation to expectations at application, sift and interview stages, with particular emphasis assessing CVs and human errors leading to misleading assessment criteria,		October 2025
3	NIO should take steps to improve record keeping across all campaigns, in particular, ensuring that candidate outcomes are clearly recorded on interview records		October 2025

The Civil Service Commission will follow up with the organisation to ensure actions have been taken to address the recommendations.

Moderation Meeting

At the Moderation Meeting, held on 12 March 2025, the Commissioners agreed the recommendations and audit rating.

Audit Rating

The audit rating is determined by compliance (breaches and Exception 1 usage); positive actions (diversity and innovation) and SCS recruitment (including external by default and Commissioner insight). The weighting will also be determined by the department size – for example, larger departments will have more SCS staff than smaller departments who may not have any SCS staff.

	Breaches	Exception 1 Usage	Diversity	Innovation	SCS Recruitment
Scale: 1-5	1	5	2	2	3
Weight (100%)	40%	25%	10%	10%	15%
Sub Score	8	25	4	4	9
Total Score	50				
Rating	FAIR				

Our Classification Systems

Complexity Score

- 5** **Most Complex** – largest most varied or currently most high-profile departments
- 4** **Complex** – large, varied or a high-profile department
- 3** **Average Complexity** – small, more focused departments, medium range and public profile
- 2** **Less Complex** – small department, low range and public profile
- 1** **Least Complex** – smallest departments with a focused remit

Considerations Informing Audit Rating

Compliance, Breaches, Exception 1 Usage, Diversity, Innovation, and SCS Recruitment.

Audit Ratings

Good	70-100
Fair	50-69
Needs Improvement	30-49
Needs Regulatory Intervention	20-29

Recommendations

Priority	Definition	Action Required
High	Non-compliance with the Recruitment Principles.	Remedial action must be taken taken urgently within an agreed timescale.
Medium	Impact on the legal requirement of the Recruitment Principles related to fair, open, and based on merit.	Remedial action should be prioritised within an agreed timetable.
Low	No, or minimal, impact on the legal Requirement of the Recruitment Principles related to fair, open, and based on merit.	Remedial action should be taken at earliest opportunity within an agreed timetable.