

PUBLIC SECTOR RECRUITMENT AND DELIVERY OF VALUE FOR MONEY

Recruitment Response Report



 028 9023 5456

 belfast@mcsgroup.jobs

 www.mcsgroup.jobs

Prepared by

PETER STEVENS

MCS Group - Group Bid and Insights Manager

LOUISE SMYTH

MCS Group - Chief Commercial Officer

STEVE MUNGAVIN

CIPFA NI

FOREWORD



Louise Smyth
Group Chief Commercial Officer
MCS Group

This report represents a unique collaboration between MCS Group, drawing on over 30 years' experience working across the recruitment market in the UK and Ireland and CIPFA, whose insights and governance expertise within public finance are critical to shaping the future of leadership in Northern Ireland. Together we share a commitment to strengthening capability, diversity, and resilience in public sector recruitment and leadership appointments.

Working with organisations across the spectrum in Northern Ireland, from SMEs to corporates, and across public and private sectors, we see trends that often cut right across boundaries. As 2025 unfolds, a new pattern has emerged, the necessity for leadership evolution. The pace of change is creating both opportunities and pressures, particularly at board level, where vacancies are rising and the leadership churn is reshaping the talent landscape.

It is clear that muddling through is not an option. The public sector must be intentional about the capability it needs. Leadership is a strategic asset, not just a set of appointments, and succession planning is now essential to building a sustainable pipeline for future governance. Change is not just inevitable, it is healthy. While often challenging, it forces organisations to adapt, stay relevant, and sharpen their focus. If we can ensure the right people are in the right seats, the opportunity to deliver value, innovation, and trust to the public is immense.

Our analysis highlights the limitations of traditional, competency-based recruitment frameworks and advocates for a transition toward skills-based and values-based hiring. Experience will always matter, but the future of recruitment is not only about a candidate's past roles; it is about identifying future leaders with the right skills, behaviours, and mindset to guide organisations through uncertainty. Private sector best practice demonstrates the power of this approach in diversifying candidate pools, accelerating appointments, and embedding resilience.

The report also emphasises the need to modernise the public appointments processes, strengthen workforce planning, and address systemic bottlenecks such as ministerial approval delays. Equally, it underscores the importance of embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion into board recruitment—particularly given that only 23% of Chair applications currently come from women.

Finally, we argue that value for money in recruitment cannot be measured by cost alone. It must encompass access to niche talent, speed, agility, and social value delivered locally within Northern Ireland communities. Contracts must be managed with discipline and foresight, not just awarded on lowest price.

In short, the future of public sector recruitment in Northern Ireland requires leadership as a strategic lever, data-led workforce planning, and intentional, values-driven hiring. Our joint partnership, bringing together MCS Group's market knowledge and CIPFA's governance expertise, offers a pathway forward to embed these principles into practice.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Northern Ireland's public sector is navigating a critical phase of transformation, with a pressing need to strengthen leadership and governance within public bodies. Board-level vacancies remain a concern, exacerbated by a lack of priority, protracted recruitment processes and a reliance on traditional, competency-based frameworks. A transition to a skills-based and values-based hiring approach, aligned with private sector best practice, is strongly advocated to attract a broader, more diverse pool of experienced leaders. Notably, gender disparities remain prevalent in board appointments, with only 23% of Chair applications from women, underlining the need for more inclusive recruitment strategies.

The NICS People Strategy 2025–2030 sets out a forward-looking roadmap but may not provide the clarity needed by interested parties regarding implementation. While key priorities such as digital enablement, leadership, and inclusion are outlined, the absence of measurable milestones, defined responsibilities, and timelines raises concerns about deliverability. Questions remain over the extent of internal skills audits, responsibility for workforce digital up-skilling, and the practical execution of initiatives like professional reviews and networking enhancements. Furthermore, the role and capability of the HR function, particularly in light of past centralisation under HR Connect, requires clearer articulation to support strategic workforce planning.

Procurement and contract management are identified as pivotal enablers of public sector reform. Emphasis is placed on balancing value for money with quality outcomes, particularly in the recruitment of specialist talent. Value must extend beyond lowest cost, encompassing access to niche candidates, technology-enabled processes, and agility in responding to organisational change. However, recent procurement examples indicate issues with supplier capability, local presence, and over-reliance on price-driven contracts that neglect quality metrics.



ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

NICS People Strategy: A Case for Clarity, Accountability, and Results

As public services undergo significant transformation, the people of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) will be central to shaping and delivering that change. The NICS People Strategy 2025–2030 sets out an ambitious direction, positioning itself as a roadmap to ensure the Civil Service remains fit for purpose in meeting both current and future challenges. However, while the intent is commendable, the strategy falls short in providing concrete metrics, milestones, and outputs needed to translate ambition into measurable progress.

The strategy rightly identifies key priorities – including skills and capacity, experience and environment, leadership, and inclusion – that matter to all civil servants, regardless of role or grade. Yet across these areas, the “how” remains vague. For example, under the “Right Shape and Size” theme, an intervention to simplify and streamline the recruitment process is noted, but no timeline, method, or performance indicator is attached. Similarly, the emphasis on internal talent mobility raises concerns that skills gaps may simply be redistributed across departments, rather than strategically addressed.

Under the “Digitally Enabled” theme, while upskilling leaders is mentioned, the strategy overlooks the broader workforce. Who is responsible for building digital capability among the wider civil service? Where is the plan for sustainable, role-specific technology upskilling? Interventions such as mentoring circles and task-and-finish groups are welcome, but these are not new ideas. What is the added value or innovation being proposed?

When it comes to civil service professions, critical interventions such as “a review of professions” and “developing best practice guidance” are lacking detail. Who will conduct this review? Will it be delivered internally or outsourced, and if so, how will it avoid becoming a shelved report with no implementation plan? Moreover, what exactly constitutes “best practice guidance”? Is it guidance on recruitment, capability, or performance expectations? Clarity is vital, especially when such interventions sit at the core of workforce planning and capability development.



In the area of Leadership and Inclusion, the focus on diversity and inclusion is welcome, but again, the absence of data-led metrics, targets, and accountability structures is concerning. Which groups are underrepresented? What baseline data is being used to shape DEI priorities? What does success look like?

One of the few clear deliverables mentioned – implementing the strategy "over the next two years" – risks being an empty promise without ownership. Who is accountable for implementation across departments, and how will this strategy cascade to Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs) and Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs)? Will they be expected to align with this strategy or develop their own? These questions remain unanswered.

The role of HR is also flagged as a key enabler. The aspiration to "build and sustain a team of HR professionals that understand the Civil Service and its people" suggests a gap that should already have been addressed, especially with a central HR workforce of over 170 professionals. What is the future of HR Connect? Once introduced to drive shared service efficiency, what roles does it play in this new strategic vision?

At a time when transformational leadership is essential, the NICS People Strategy must go beyond vision-setting and ensure measurable outcomes, defined responsibilities, and transparent governance. Without these fundamentals, the risk is that the strategy becomes aspirational rather than operational, a missed opportunity at a time when delivery matters most.

Vacancies in the Boardrooms of Public Bodies

As the Northern Ireland public sector undergoes far-reaching transformation, strong leadership and effective governance at the board level have become essential. The capacity of Public Bodies to deliver reform, improve public services, and drive innovation hinges on attracting and retaining the right leadership talent. **Anecdotal evidence points to a lack of prioritisation of boardroom appointments by departments resulting in delays and increased pressures on existing board members.**

Building a Sustainable Leadership Pipeline

Leadership vacancies across Public Bodies' **boardrooms** are not isolated occurrences; they are part of a broader, ongoing need for succession planning and leadership development. **Boardroom appointments are typically for four years that can be renewable for a further four years which should make recruitment planning straight forward.** These recruitment

activities must be continuous and embedded within workforce planning processes across government. To ensure continuity, diversity, and strategic capacity in boardrooms, public sector organisations must:

- Identify emerging leaders and future board candidates early.
- Provide leadership development pathways that prepare individuals for governance roles.
- Maintain oversight of term limits, reappointment cycles, and future board needs.

To support anecdotal evidence, it would be helpful to understand the following:

- The number of board member posts in our public bodies.
- The number of vacancies that exist at a given point in time.
- The length of time each post has been vacant.
- The length of time it takes for Ministerial approval.
- Whether recruitment is designed around the needs of the public body or a more generic board member.
- The extent to which Chairs of public bodies are involved in the recruitment process.

Rethinking Recruitment: From Competency to Skills-Based and values-based Hiring

Traditional public appointment processes tend to favour individuals with prior public sector experience and familiarity with competency-based recruitment. While experience is important, this model often limits diversity of thought and professional background.

A shift to skills-based hiring is recommended to:

- Attract candidates with relevant, transferable skills from private and third sectors.
- Better align board capabilities with strategic priorities (e.g. digital transformation, ESG, financial oversight).
- Focus recruitment on outcomes, leadership behaviours and values, and sector-specific knowledge rather than rigid past roles. This approach is widely used in the private sector and offers a more agile and inclusive model to meet modern governance needs.

Addressing Diversity Gaps in Board Leadership

Improving representation in boardrooms remains an ongoing challenge. The Equality Commission's Participation in Public Life report shows:

- Women make up 46% of public appointments overall.
 - However, only 23% of Chair role applicants are women, compared to 77% men.
 - Skills-based hiring can enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion by removing structural biases and broadening the candidate pool. This must be supported by targeted outreach,
-

mentoring programmes, and transparent selection criteria that do not disadvantage non-traditional applicants.

Enhancing Workforce Planning and Use of Data

One of the most persistent issues in public appointments is the lack of accessible, real-time data on when board positions are due to expire, which roles are due for recruitment or reappointment and which skillsets are needed for future governance needs. Although The Executive Office publishes the All Aboard guide, the current system is static, lacks visibility and only published twice a year. There is a clear opportunity to **simplify the application and recruitment process**:

- Introduce a live, digital platform to manage and advertise public appointments similar to that of the UK Civil Service where all public appointments are regularly updated and advertised on <https://apply-for-public-appointment.service.gov.uk/roles>
- Provide applicants with up-to-date information and application tracking.
- Enable workforce planners to make informed decisions about succession and board composition.

Governance Delays and Ministerial Approval Bottlenecks

Another area of concern is the delay **is because** appointments require ministerial approval. These bureaucratic bottlenecks can result in prolonged vacancies, weakened governance, and reduced effectiveness at board level. There must be a concerted effort to:

- Streamline approval processes.
- Introduce interim appointment options where appropriate **e.g. from a pre-approved pool of experience board members who can provide capacity temporarily**.
- Increase transparency around timelines and points of accountability.

Recommendations and Strategic Actions

To build a resilient and future-ready public sector leadership model, **departments should prioritise boardroom recruitment if necessary over their scrutiny and 'sponsorship' role**. The following actions are proposed:

- Embed succession planning across all departments and Public Bodies.
 - Adopt a skills-based and **values-based** recruitment framework for board roles.
 - Introduce a digital public appointments platform with real-time vacancy tracking.
 - Set diversity targets with transparent reporting against under-represented groups.
 - Improve cross-departmental oversight of term expiries and reappointment schedules.
 - Streamline ministerial sign-off processes to avoid unnecessary delays.
-

- Strengthen HR and workforce planning functions to better forecast leadership needs.

Leadership as a Strategic Asset

Board leadership is not simply a matter of filling vacancies; it is a strategic lever for public sector transformation. By investing in a diverse, skilled, and forward-looking leadership pipeline, Northern Ireland can ensure that its Public Bodies are well-equipped to deliver reform, improve outcomes, and build public trust.

A modernised, data-driven, and inclusive approach to public appointments will help secure the leadership needed to guide the sector through its next chapter.

Contract Management: A Private Sector Approach for Public Sector Success

Although some improvements have been made in response to well-documented contract management failures 15-20 years ago, further work in this area is required. Awarding a contract is only the beginning, not the end, of a successful procurement process. In today's environment, where public services are under increasing scrutiny and budgets are tighter than ever, robust contract management must become a strategic priority. Public sector organisations should take a cue from private sector best practices by ensuring that contracts are not only awarded competitively, but also managed with discipline, accountability, and a relentless focus on outcomes.

Value for money in public sector recruitment must extend far beyond lowest cost. It must encompass:

- Economy – delivering services at the right price.
- Efficiency – ensuring processes run smoothly and responsively.
- Effectiveness – achieving the desired outcomes and impact.

Recruitment providers should not only offer competitive pricing, but also demonstrate:

- Shared public sector values ultimately to improve the lives of citizens in Northern Ireland, i.e. a 'whole system' approach to standards in public life.
 - Proven access to niche and high demand talent.
 - Innovative branding, attraction, and assessment techniques.
 - Deep sector-specific knowledge and talent pipelines.
 - Smart use of technology to drive transparency and speed.
 - Flexibility to align services with changing organisational or policy needs.
 - And delivery of Social Value within the communities they serve.
-

But even the most well-structured procurement exercise fails without effective post-award contract management.

Those managing public sector contracts with suppliers must have the relevant skills and adopt a more commercial mindset - where performance is actively tracked, expectations are enforced, and improvement is non-negotiable. This means:

- Setting and regularly reviewing clear SLAs and KPIs.
- Proactively addressing underperformance or non-compliance.
- Driving continuous improvement through data, insight, and innovation.
- Holding suppliers accountable for quality, service delivery, and local impact.
- Ensuring ongoing compliance with safeguarding, equality, and data protection laws.

Recent examples have highlighted systemic weaknesses: suppliers awarded places on frameworks despite lacking local presence, relevant expertise, or even the core capabilities listed under specific Lots. In some cases, contracts worth millions have been awarded purely on price, with quality reduced to a simple pass/fail hurdle, and no meaningful oversight post-award.

This approach undermines service delivery, risks legal non-compliance, and fails to deliver value to the communities' frameworks are meant to support. To safeguard public interest and deliver real impact, contract management must be elevated to a strategic function with the same rigor, expectations, and performance culture that the private sector applies to its high-value supplier relationships.

MI (Management Information) and Reporting

MI and Reporting are critical tools in understanding and strategically managing agency staffing within the public sector. Robust data collection and analysis enable public bodies to identify patterns and trends – particularly the direct correlation between **increased agency usage and rising sickness or absenteeism levels among permanent staff**. In parallel, persistent skills gaps, particularly in digital, IT, and project management, often drive spikes in temporary staffing demand. By integrating workforce MI across agency spend, absence data, and vacancy rates, departments can gain a clear, actionable view of where pressure points exist and why. This intelligence allows leaders to make informed, proactive decisions – whether to bolster permanent resourcing in key areas, invest in internal capability development, or redesign roles and services to reduce dependency on contingent labour. Aligning MI with strategic workforce planning is essential to control costs, mitigate risk, and

ensure that agency staffing supports – rather than substitutes – a sustainable, long-term workforce model.

Delivering and Auditing Social Value for Northern Ireland Communities

The introduction of PPN 01/21 marked a pivotal change in public procurement policy, placing **Social Value at the heart of procurement decisions** rather than treating it as an optional consideration. This policy shift rightly demands that suppliers demonstrate both capability and credibility in designing, delivering, and reporting on Social Value initiatives that align with strategic public priorities.

However, for Northern Ireland, a significant concern remains: **Social Value outcomes are not explicitly required to be delivered within NI communities**. The current language in PPN 01/21 – referencing only vague terms such as “communities affected by the contract” and “local communities” leaves too much room for interpretation. As a result, suppliers without a meaningful presence or operations in NI can secure public sector contracts while delivering Social Value interventions elsewhere, contributing little or nothing to the communities in Northern Ireland where the actual impact should be felt.

This loophole undermines the intent of the policy and risks marginalising the very people it aims to benefit.

To ensure the public sector is truly leveraging procurement to build stronger, fairer communities in Northern Ireland, it is essential that:

- Social Value activities are clearly required to be delivered within Northern Ireland.
- Suppliers' Social Value proposals are assessed for local relevance and impact.
- And most importantly, Social Value commitments are independently audited on a regular basis to confirm that promised outcomes are being delivered – and delivered locally.

Frameworks must be scrutinised to ensure that external suppliers are not profiting from NI public contracts **without giving back to NI society**. Social Value is not just a checkbox – it is a commitment to the people of Northern Ireland, and it must be enforced with clarity, transparency, and accountability.

10th Floor, The Ewart, 3 Bedford Street, Belfast, BT2 7EP
www.mcsgroup.jobs

BELFAST: +44 (0)28 9023 5456
DUBLIN: +353 1906 9574
LONDON: +44 (0)20 3854 6666
BOSTON: +1 617 861 4259

