

PEOPLE STRATEGY

ANNUAL PROGRESS

REPORT

YEAR 1



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MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

One year ago, we launched the People Strategy, setting out a clear ambition to build a modern, agile and inclusive Civil Service that is equipped to meet the challenges of today and those ahead.

Our people are at the heart of delivering public services. By investing in skills, development and wellbeing of our workforce through this Strategy, we will build a more capable, resilient and flexible Civil Service, equipped to respond to emerging challenges and deliver for the public now and in the future.

Lasting change depends on strong leadership, collaboration and a shared commitment across the Executive and senior leaders. The People Strategy provides a clear direction to ensure the Civil Service has the skills, capacity, leadership and culture needed to deliver.

Over the past year, we have moved from strategy to implementation, with tangible improvements to workplace practices, stronger engagement with staff, and increased focus on wellbeing.

Recruitment and retention are being strengthened through initiatives such as the Job Families Framework and strategic workforce planning - helping ensure people are supported to develop, progress and contribute where they add the greatest value.

This report highlights the progress made and reaffirms our commitment to deliver on the ambitions set out in the People Strategy. Together, these actions will help build a capable, resilient Civil Service and support the delivery of high-quality public services.

John O'Dowd
Finance Minister



INTRODUCTION FROM THE HEAD OF THE CIVIL SERVICE

I am pleased to introduce this first progress report on the NICS People Strategy 2025-2030.

One year on, we are seeing real progress - not only in establishing the foundations for long term workforce renewal, but in delivering changes that are already improving how we work and supporting colleagues across the organisation.

The People Strategy is our system wide plan to ensure the Civil Service has the skills, capacity, leadership and culture required to support ministers and deliver public services effectively – now and in the future.

As this report sets out, progress has been made across all three strategic priorities - Skills and Capacity; Experience and Environment; and Leadership and Inclusion - with delivery now firmly underway.

This progress reflects a strong collective effort. Delivery cannot sit with any single part of the system. Strengthened governance, clearer sponsorship, and improved coordination are now in place, with Permanent Secretaries actively leading key initiatives, and teams across departments driving implementation. This shared ownership is critical to sustaining momentum.

Year 2 is about delivery at scale - ensuring changes are implemented consistently, so that they are felt in practice across every department.

That will depend on continued collective leadership, aligning behind a single direction and acting together to continue building a sustainable, high performing organisation.

I am proud to lead the Civil Service at this stage of its journey. Every colleague is central to improving public services and delivering lasting change. We will continue to work collaboratively with colleagues, professions, trade unions and other key stakeholders through open and constructive engagement.

This report demonstrates that strong foundations are in place. The challenge now is delivery - maintaining momentum and ensuring the benefits of the People Strategy are realised in practice for our ministers, our workforce, our organisation, and ultimately for the public.

Jayne Brady

Head of the Civil Service



OVERVIEW FROM THE NICS BOARD

The NICS People Strategy 2025-2030 has established a clear framework for workforce renewal and provided a strong foundation for sustained system-wide change.

The Strategy sets the direction to 2030, focused on building the capacity, capability and culture needed for a modern outcomes focused Civil Service able to deliver high-quality services in an increasingly challenging environment.

From the outset, the Board has been clear that successful delivery of the People Strategy will be a shared effort, requiring collective leadership across all departments and a strong emphasis on achieving measurable outcomes.

Progress over the first year of Strategy implementation reflects this approach, with strengthened governance, clearer alignment and increased collaboration supporting the transition from ambition to implementation.

The establishment of the People Committee has strengthened this oversight and accountability, ensuring that people priorities are managed as a coherent, system-wide programme. The appointment of NICS Board members as sponsors for major initiatives has further reinforced senior ownership and collective leadership.

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The first year of the People Strategy has demonstrated the importance of a collective will to make real change happen for the benefit of Civil Service employees and ultimately the public we serve. Strong, system-wide leadership and clear accountability are in place. We are starting to experience the benefits of the collective will and more coordinated approach, with departments, professions and corporate teams working together to deliver shared priorities.

Attention now turns to embedding these approaches and building on early progress at scale - ensuring consistent implementation and measurable improvements for people and public service delivery. We will also focus on increasing our communication to employees and key stakeholders to ensure they are aware of what is coming next and when, and where they have opportunities to participate in the next steps.

Laura McKeaveney

Chair of the NICS Board People Committee



The Board recognises that how we achieve what is set out in the strategy is as important as what is delivered. Cross-departmental collaboration, effective communications and ongoing engagement with stakeholders, including trade unions, have helped to build shared understanding, support change, and ensure that delivery is sustainable.

Alignment with wider enabling programmes, particularly Integr8, is critical to enabling consistent, timely and data-driven workforce management. This will support more informed management interventions and improved organisational, team and individual performance.

While strong foundations are now in place, the next phase must demonstrate impact at scale - through consistent implementation, clear measurement and improvements in outcomes for staff and public service delivery.

Successful delivery of the People Strategy will be central to addressing the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Audit Office and supporting the development of a more collaborative, skilled and agile Civil Service, equipped to meet current and future demands.



OVERVIEW OF KEY ACHIEVEMENTS AND PRIORITIES

DELIVERED



NICS PEOPLE STRATEGY 2025-2030 LAUNCHED



STRATEGIC WORKFORCE PLANNING GUIDE PUBLISHED



SIX PRIORITY HR POLICIES RENEWED AND IMPLEMENTED



PEOPLE STRATEGY HUB LAUNCHED AND NICS-WIDE COMMUNICATIONS & ENGAGEMENT NETWORK ESTABLISHED



AO RECRUITMENT PILOT DELIVERS 150+ APPOINTMENTS IN UNDER 12 WEEKS



NICS JOB FAMILIES FRAMEWORK DEVELOPED



NEW PROFESSIONS FRAMEWORK LAUNCHED



IMPLEMENTED 2024 AND 2025 PAY AWARDS



DIGITAL CAPABILITY FRAMEWORK AGREED



30+ HR POLICIES BEING RENEWED



NEW HR OPERATING MODEL BEING DESIGNED AND IMPLEMENTED



OPTIONS FOR A 2026-2029 MULTI-YEAR PAY AGREEMENT UNDER CONSIDERATION



JOB FAMILIES PHASE 2, INCLUDING DEVELOPMENT OF CAREER FRAMEWORKS



SENIOR CIVIL SERVICE (SCS) STRATEGY IN DEVELOPMENT



TOOLS IN USE TO IDENTIFY CRITICAL ROLES AND STANDARDISE WORKFORCE PLANNING



PREPARATIONS TO BRING OUTSOURCED HR SERVICES BACK IN-HOUSE

WE ARE HERE

NEXT



DEPARTMENTAL STRATEGIC WORKFORCE PLANS COMPLETED



JOB FAMILIES AND PROFESSIONS ALIGNED WITH INTEGR8 SYSTEMS



WIDENING OPPORTUNITIES, INCLUDING AN EMPLOYABILITY SCHEME FOR CARE-EXPERIENCED PEOPLE

REFLECTIONS

The first year of delivery has established a clear and coherent foundation for workforce renewal across the Civil Service.

Since its launch, the People Strategy has provided a single, consistent framework for improvement, bringing greater structure and alignment to activity across departments.

Clear progress has been made in priority areas. Workforce planning capability has been strengthened, and the development of job families and professions has begun to create clearer role definitions and career pathways.

Important steps have been taken across wider areas, including recruitment, health and wellbeing, leadership development, digital capability, pay and reward, and support for line managers.

Important policy renewal has also been delivered in a number of priority areas. Together, these changes are improving consistency and strengthening the Civil Service's overall people management system.

A key lesson from Year 1 is that success depends on consistent application across the system. While central leadership and strategic direction are critical, outcomes are ultimately delivered at local level through day-to-day implementation.

Progress is strongest where there is clear ownership, active sponsorship and well-defined outputs. Structures that support early intervention and escalation have also proved important in maintaining momentum and addressing delivery challenges.

The central role of line managers has also been reinforced. Practical support - through guidance, tools and learning - is critical to enabling consistent implementation and embedding change in practice.

Challenges remain. Implementation has been uneven in some areas, reflecting organisational complexity and competing pressures, while workforce data is not yet at the level required to fully support real-time decision-making.

The next phase must therefore focus on embedding what has been developed, ensuring consistent adoption across departments and strengthening the link between delivery and measurable impact. This will require sustained leadership, shared accountability and a continued focus on translating strategy into practice.

Jill Minne

People Strategy SRO



HIGHLIGHTS –

9 KEY INITIATIVES



HR POLICY RENEWAL PROGRAMME

FLEXIBLE

ways of working supported, including new Hybrid Working Policy

IMPROVED

clarity on standards through renewed conduct policies

STRENGTHENED

support in priority areas, including domestic & sexual abuse

NEW CORPORATE APPROACH TO STRATEGIC WORKFORCE PLANNING (SWP)

FIRST

NICS SWP Guide published with practical toolkit

NEW

community of practice embedding SWP across departments

DEVELOPED

new job families & professions framework

REVIEW OF CIVIL SERVICE PROFESSIONS

COMPLETED

comprehensive review of Civil Service professions

CLARIFIED

purpose, scope and definition of professions

PUBLISHED

NICS Professions Framework & Assessment Tool

SIMPLIFY AND STREAMLINE THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

12 WEEKS

end-to-end recruitment pilot delivered (reduced from 18 months)

150+

new AOs in post through pilot competition

NEW

vacancy and recruitment dashboards providing real-time insight

DIGITAL UPSKILLING OF THE WORKFORCE

DEVELOPED

new NICS Digital Capability Framework

LAUNCHED

digital leadership training programme

NEW

Digital Empowered NICS Steering Group

IMPROVE WORKFORCE HEALTH AND WELLBEING

65%

reduction in Occupational Health waiting times

9,000+

staff engaged in NICS WELL events

MENTAL HEALTH

forum established

EQUIP AND SUPPORT MANAGERS

TOOLKIT

for managers developed with new guidance, resources & learning

TRAUMA-INFORMED

training embedded across NICS

41%

reduction in stress-related absence in pilot area with HR wraparound support

BUILDING CAPABILITY WITH A FOCUS ON COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

LAUNCHED

new leadership programmes & coaching pilot

DELIVERED

NICS leadership events & cross-sector forums

DEVELOPED

new SCS strategy

FAIR PAY & REWARD

IMPLEMENTED

2024 and 2025 pay awards

INCREASED

key allowances and enhanced contractual maternity & adoption pay

3-YEAR PAY DEAL

proposals developed for negotiation with Trade Unions

HR POLICY RENEWAL

Modern HR policies that are clearer, more consistent and easier to use

We're modernising HR policies so they better reflect today's workplace and feel clearer to use in practice. A more coordinated approach to policy development is improving how policies are understood and applied, helping managers act with confidence and fairness. This is reducing complexity while supporting a more inclusive and supportive working environment across the Civil Service.



Over the past year, significant progress has been made in modernising and strengthening the HR policy framework across the Civil Service, ensuring it reflects today's workforce and supports consistent, effective people management.

Modernising policy to support today's workforce

Year 1 advanced a coordinated programme of HR policy development, review and implementation across the organisation.

The completion of the Hybrid Working Policy marked a major milestone, supporting more flexible ways of working. Its implementation phase, including completion of workstyle agreements, brings clarity and consistency for staff and managers while supporting business delivery in a changing environment.

Key conduct related policies have also been updated to improve clarity and confidence in standards. Updates to the Standards of Conduct, alongside the implementation of a revised Grievance and Dignity at Work Policy and the introduction of a single grievance procedure, strengthen consistency and transparency in the application of policies.

Creating a safe and supportive workplace

The launch of the revised Domestic and Sexual Abuse Policy, timed to coincide with the 16 Days of Activism campaign, reinforces the Civil Service's commitment to providing compassionate and effective support for staff.

Launched by the Minister of Finance and Head of Civil Service, in partnership with the Trade Unions, the policy reflects a collaborative approach to policy development and a shared commitment to strengthening support for colleagues.

Kathryn Clarke said:



“As a Safe Place Advocate in the Civil Service, I was really encouraged by the person-centred approach shown throughout the renewal of this policy. There was genuine engagement with colleagues, Trade Unions and expert organisations, with a strong focus on making sure the policy was not only sensitive, but truly practical.

“This co-design approach has helped shape a policy which ensures that anyone who is a victim of domestic or sexual abuse can be confident that if they raise an issue with a colleague, manager or Safe Place Advocate, they will be listened to and signposted to specialised support services.”

Building inclusive, flexible and mobile career pathways

Progress has also been made in developing policies to support recruitment, employee mobility, inclusion and career progression. Work to develop a new policy approach to enable employee mobility has been shaped through engagement with senior leaders to support a clearer, more practical approach to talent movement across the organisation.

Work has also advanced on policies that strengthen inclusion and belonging, including the development of a new Staff Networks Policy and progress towards a revised Reasonable Adjustment Policy, supporting greater consistency across people practices.

Enabling performance, attendance and capability

Further activity has focused on policies that support effective performance management, attendance and capability. A revised Supporting Attendance Policy has been developed and consultation has progressed, alongside preparatory work on Performance Management and Probation policy reforms.

Progress has also supported wider system reform, including key milestones to underpin the future implementation of Success Profiles and to ensure alignment between policy, talent management and recruitment.

Looking ahead

Building on this progress, HR policy renewal will continue in Year 2, with more than 30 policies progressing through review, consultation and renewal.

Priority activity will include consulting on, approving, and implementing key policies, including Reasonable Adjustments, Discipline, Staff Networks, Employee Mobility, and Supporting Attendance, while ensuring consistent application across the organisation.

Further work will progress on policies supporting inclusion, flexibility and workforce sustainability, alongside activity to strengthen the underpinning policy infrastructure.

Engagement with Trade Union colleagues and stakeholders will remain central to delivery, ensuring policies are well informed, understood and effective in practice.



Good policy should help people deal with real situations confidently and fairly. What's been encouraging this year is the way the renewal programme has been approached - listening carefully, involving colleagues and shaping policies that support us in delivering at pace the priorities of ministers and are clearer and more practical to use. In Year 2, we need to keep that momentum going, with further renewal in key areas alongside consistent application across the organisation.

Katrina Godfrey

Joint NICS Board Sponsor



Our HR Policies are most effective when they provide clear, practical support for day-to-day working. We have made a strong start in refreshing key areas, with a sharper focus on what is usable and relevant in practice. The priority for Year 2 is to build on that progress and ensure the changes are understood, applied consistently and delivering tangible impact.

Moirá Doherty

Joint NICS Board Sponsor



STRATEGIC WORKFORCE PLANNING

Strengthening how we plan and develop our workforce

We're strengthening strategic workforce planning through a more coordinated approach that builds a shared view of roles and capability across departments. These foundations support more informed planning, clearer development pathways, and better alignment between people and organisational priorities, helping ensure the Civil Service has the right size, shape and skills to meet current and future demands.



Over the past year, the Civil Service has taken significant steps to establish a more strategic, evidence based approach to workforce planning and capability.

Strengthening the foundations for workforce planning

A corporate approach to Strategic Workforce Planning (SWP) has been introduced. The NICS SWP Guide provides departments with practical tools and structured guidance, helping to build capability and embed a consistent approach.

This has been supported by the creation of a Community of Practice, bringing departments together to share learning and strengthen delivery. A SWP Working Group has also been established to strengthen governance and support more aligned decision-making across the system. Engagement with other organisations and jurisdictions has helped shape the approach and ensure alignment with emerging best practice.

Work has also begun to strengthen the evidence base for workforce planning, including development of a Critical Roles tool and supporting materials, supporting a more systematic approach to workforce risk and resilience.



Maura Burton,
a member
of the SWP
Community of
Practice, said:

“Developing a shared approach to workforce planning is helping us take a more strategic view. The tools and guidance are supporting more consistent, evidence-based decisions about how we deploy and develop our people.”

Looking ahead

In Year 2, work will centre on embedding SWP consistently across departments and strengthening its role in shaping workforce decisions. This includes clarifying accountabilities, further developing tools and guidance, and strengthening the link between workforce planning, critical roles and succession planning.

Delivering sustained impact will depend on consistent departmental adoption and continued improvement in workforce data and management information. Over time, this will support a shift from reactive, in-year decisions towards more planned, evidence-based workforce management, improving affordability, prioritisation and service resilience.



Strategic workforce planning is about making better decisions earlier - using stronger evidence to understand where we need capacity, capability and resilience across the organisation. We've made a solid start this year by putting clearer tools and guidance in place. The next stage is to embed that approach more fully across departments, so we can plan ahead with greater confidence.

Neil Gibson

NICS Board Sponsor



JOB FAMILIES AND PROFESSIONS

Strengthening roles, careers and professional capability

We're modernising how roles and careers are structured across the Civil Service through the introduction of Job Families and Professions, creating a clear, connected framework that supports stronger capability, clearer pathways and more consistent professional leadership.



Job Families: creating a shared structure for roles and careers

During Year 1, a clearer and more consistent job architecture has been developed through the Job Families Framework. This establishes a shared structure for defining roles and career pathways, helping create a common language across departments and greater clarity in workforce design and development.

Strong engagement across the Civil Service has helped build confidence in the approach. Once implemented, the framework will support more informed workforce planning and a clearer understanding of capability across the organisation.

Lisa-Jane McIlveen said:

“I was really pleased to receive an update from the Head of the Civil Service on the development of the new Job Families Framework. I understand that it works well in other jurisdictions, and so it’s encouraging to see the NICS moving in this direction.

“It makes a lot of sense and has the potential to bring real benefits - not just for individuals, but for teams, departments and the organisation as a whole. I’m particularly interested in how it can open up clearer development and progression opportunities, and I’m looking forward to seeing how it evolves.”

Civil Service Professions: strengthening professional capability and leadership

Alongside this, a comprehensive review of Civil Service professions has been completed, providing a clearer and more consistent understanding of professional groupings. This has clarified the purpose, scope and definition of professions, strengthening both coherence and professional identity.

A key milestone has been the publication of the NICS Professions Framework and associated assessment tool. Together, these provide a consistent basis for understanding professional capability, maturity and development needs across departments, supporting a more structured and transparent approach to capability assessment and development.

The Professions Framework acts as a professional overlay to Job Families, setting standards, expectations and leadership for professional communities. Together, these frameworks support clearer career pathways, improved capability planning and increased mobility across roles and departments.

Martin McKendry,
Head of Profession
for Agriculture, said:



“The Professions Framework is an important step in strengthening how we develop capability across the Civil Service. Having clearer expectations and a more consistent approach to professional standards will help support development, build confidence and enable us to deliver more effectively as an organisation.”

Looking ahead

The next phase of this work will centre on embedding the Job Families and Professions frameworks in practice and strengthening integration across the Civil Service.

This includes developing a central job library, supporting system integration through Integr8, and embedding consistent application across departments. In parallel, work will continue to strengthen professional governance and leadership, including clearer accountability through Heads of Profession and

the development of a professions network to support collaboration, shared standards and capability building across departments.

Supporting guidance, communications and reporting will also continue to evolve, including preparation for an annual professions report to support transparency and oversight. Ongoing engagement with departments and stakeholders, including trade unions, will be critical to ensure consistent and sustainable implementation.



Job Families and professions provide a shared structure for roles, clearer standards, stronger professional leadership and capability. Just as importantly, they give our people greater clarity about their roles, development opportunities and potential career pathways, helping colleagues see how they can grow and progress throughout their careers.

This year has established important foundations through the development of consistent frameworks. The aim now is to embed these in a joined-up way, strengthening capability, supporting career pathways and enabling greater consistency across the Civil Service.

Neil Gibson
NICS Board Sponsor



SIMPLIFYING AND STREAMLINING RECRUITMENT

Faster, simpler recruitment that improves experience and delivers results

We're streamlining recruitment to make it quicker, clearer and easier to navigate. By strengthening governance, improving planning and making better use of technology, we're reducing delays and improving the experience for candidates and panels. This is helping departments fill roles more quickly and enabling new colleagues to contribute sooner.

Over the past year, progress has been made in simplifying and streamlining recruitment, with early progress already evident. Challenges associated with complex, lengthy processes are being addressed, laying the foundation for a more agile and responsive recruitment system.

Redesigning how recruitment is planned, governed and delivered is central to this work. A Recruitment Steering Group, bringing together senior representatives from departments, now provides clear leadership and direction

A focus on efficiency and better use of technology is supporting improvement. Automation and digital tools are reducing duplication, improving oversight and enhancing the end-to-end experience.

A service-wide vacancy management dashboard now provides visibility of vacancies across the organisation, supporting more proactive workforce planning and decision-making, while a new competition dashboard will embed key performance indicators to support continuous improvement across the recruitment lifecycle.

Policy and supporting frameworks are also being progressed to drive improvements, including the renewal of recruitment policy and the development of Success Profiles to replace the current competency framework.

Work to strengthen workforce supply is also underway. Inclusive entry routes and early talent pipelines - including apprenticeships, placements, internships and JobStart - are helping to widen access and build future capability across the Civil Service.

A fresh approach to recruitment: the AO pilot

One of the most visible impacts of this new approach has been the Administrative Officer (AO) recruitment pilot. This reimaged the end-to-end process, reducing time to hire from up to 18 months to just 12 weeks from launch to appointment.

As a result, more than 150 new AOs were in post by January 2026, enabling departments to respond more quickly to pressing capacity needs.

Early evaluation found that candidates reported a positive experience, particularly welcoming the speed, clarity and accessibility of the revised process. Insights from delivery have been systematically captured and are being used to refine and improve the model as it is scaled.

Catherine Shannon, Deputy Secretary, NICS HR said the changes represent a significant shift in how recruitment is delivered across the Civil Service:



“The success of the AO pilot has demonstrated the power of designing recruitment with both pace and quality in mind - proving that faster does not mean compromising standards.

“With stronger leadership, enhanced digital tools and a commitment to continuous improvement, the organisation is building a recruitment system that is better equipped to meet organisational needs.”

A panel perspective

For those closely involved in delivery, the impact was immediately clear.



John Baillie, a panel member for the AO pilot, said:

“Recruitment in the NICS has historically taken much longer than any of us would like, and longer than what’s good for the organisation, with timelines extending beyond a year in some cases.

“The fact that this competition ran end-to-end in 12 weeks is a real milestone and certainly a significant step forward.

“As a panel member, the process was well run and well supported, with strong candidates appointed, and it clearly shows the potential of the new approach.”

The candidate experience

The benefits were also felt by candidates.

Aaron Morton, who was successful in the competition, spoke positively about the experience:



“The recruitment process was really straightforward. I can get nervous at interviews, but the buzz at the recruitment event and talking to different people on the day really put me at ease.

“It was a very positive experience, and I’m really enjoying my new role in the Civil Service.”

The AO pilot was designed as a test case for wider reform, and it is already informing delivery at scale. The approach has been applied to other roles, including Staff Officer Accountants, Vehicle Examiners and industrial workers, with similarly improved timelines and outcomes.

Looking ahead

Further campaigns are now underway to extend this model across the Civil Service. A new AO recruitment exercise to fill over 600 roles within a 12-week timeframe is progressing, demonstrating the scalability and sustainability of the reformed approach.



This first year has shown that recruitment can be faster, clearer and more responsive. The progress already made gives us a strong base to build from. We now need to apply that learning more widely and consistently, so departments can fill roles more quickly and people can move into meaningful work sooner.

David Malcolm
NICS Board Sponsor



IMPROVING WORKFORCE HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Improving wellbeing through accessible support shaped by staff experience

We're strengthening how we support the health and wellbeing of our people, with a focus on making support more visible, accessible and informed by staff experience. A wide range of activity and improved access to services is helping to promote earlier support and build a healthier working environment. This supports colleagues to stay well and engaged in their work.



Over the past year, the Civil Service has strengthened its approach to workforce health and wellbeing, with an emphasis on improving access to support and responding more effectively to staff experience.

A broad programme of activity has been delivered through the Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Action Plan, including in-person sessions and events designed to provide practical support and opportunities for connection and learning.

The scale of activity delivered during Year 1 reflects both strong engagement and growing

awareness of the support available. More than 9,000 staff participated in health and wellbeing events, with over 1,100 face to face sessions delivered across the Civil Service as part of the wider programme of support.

This level of participation highlights the importance of accessible, visible support and demonstrates the value staff place on opportunities to engage, connect and build their understanding of wellbeing. It provides a strong foundation for continued development of support in line with the needs of a diverse and evolving workforce.

Improving mental wellbeing support

Particular attention has been given to mental health and wellbeing, including enhanced guidance for line managers and strengthened support for bereaved staff, informed by the 2024 Bereavement Survey.

Reflecting on the progress made, Mark O'Hara said:

"In my work, and through my role on the Mental Health Forum, I can see the real effort going into improving support for staff. There's a stronger focus now on making help practical and easy to access, and on recognising the challenges people face both in and outside work. That's what helps people stay well and feel supported."

Listening to staff and acting on insight

Workforce insight has played a central role. The Women's Health and Wellbeing Survey, developed with the Women's Network and Trade Unions, received over 2,000 responses and directly informed a new action plan addressing priority areas such as menopause, mental health and work life balance.

Insights have also shaped work through the Mental Health Forum and a pilot Retention Framework, supporting more targeted approaches to staff support and retention.

Improving access to timely support

Access to Occupational Health Services has improved significantly, with waiting times reduced by approximately 65%, enabling earlier intervention and faster case progression.

Cross sector collaboration has also supported the sharing of learning and strengthened service delivery.

Looking ahead

Year 2 will build on this foundation, with a renewed Action Plan.

Targeted programmes, including the Women's Health Action Plan and expanded retention activity, will be rolled out, alongside improvements in Occupational Health systems and data driven support for departments.



Supporting health and wellbeing is not separate from delivery - it's part of how we build a sustainable, high-performing Civil Service. Year 1 has seen real progress, particularly through improved access to support and stronger use of staff insight. The challenge now is ensuring the right support is consistently available where and when people need it.

Hugh Widdis

NICS Board Sponsor



BUILDING CAPABILITY WITH A FOCUS ON COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Building a confident, capable Civil Service where everyone is equipped to lead

We're building capability across the Civil Service with a strong focus on collective leadership. By expanding leadership programmes and creating more opportunities for shared learning, we're helping leaders connect, collaborate and respond to shared challenges. This is supporting more joined-up working, stronger relationships and a clearer sense of shared purpose.



During Year 1, leadership capability has been strengthened across the Civil Service, with a clear emphasis on building more connected, collaborative and system wide leadership.

Strengthening leadership capability across the system

A renewed and expanded suite of leadership programmes has been introduced to support leaders at different stages of their careers in building the skills, confidence and behaviours needed to lead in a complex and changing environment.

There has been a strong emphasis on collaboration, inclusion and shared responsibility, reflecting the growing importance of collective leadership in delivering cross-cutting priorities. Initiatives such as the Impact programme for Grade 6 and 7 leaders have supported key transition points, helping build confidence and strengthen connections across the organisation.

Courtney Dawson highlighted how the programme is supporting a more collective leadership culture:



“We’re seeing a real shift towards more collective ways of leading, and it’s important that we feel confident working collaboratively and sharing responsibility across our teams.

“The IMPACT G6 & 7 programme helped put that into context and gave me a clearer understanding of how we can strengthen collective leadership to deliver better outcomes together.”

Development of the Senior Civil Service Strategy was also a key priority during Year 1, supported by engagement across a range of stakeholders to help shape a shared approach to leadership across the Civil Service.

Creating space for connection and shared learning

A key feature of Year 1 has been the creation of opportunities for leaders to come together, share insight and engage with the wider challenges facing the organisation. Senior Civil Service leadership events have provided space for discussion, helping to build a stronger sense of shared purpose.

This has been complemented by cross sector engagement, including collaboration with academic partners and participation in wider public sector forums. These partnerships have brought fresh perspectives into the Civil Service and supported the exchange of learning, helping leaders understand and respond to common challenges beyond organisational boundaries.

Embedding inclusive leadership

Leadership development has also focused on embedding more inclusive, resilient and forward looking leadership approaches. Programmes have incorporated themes such as innovation and digital transformation alongside compassionate leadership, supporting leaders to respond effectively to evolving demands while creating positive and supportive working environments.

Targeted programmes for senior leaders, including the Grade 3 leadership programme, have strengthened both individual and collective capability, building a more cohesive and aligned leadership culture across the Civil Service.

Looking ahead

Year 2 will prioritise sustaining and embedding collective leadership behaviours across the organisation. Leadership development will continue to evolve through refreshed programmes, greater flexibility in learning design and expanded opportunities for peer learning and networking.

Further leadership events and forums will provide continued opportunities for dialogue and shared understanding of organisational priorities. The Senior Civil Service Strategy will also progress to implementation in Year 2, providing a clearer and more coherent framework for leadership across the Civil Service.



One of the most positive developments this year has been more opportunities for leaders to come together more openly across the Civil Service. That is beginning to change how we work across boundaries. The aim now is to turn that progress into everyday practice, so collective leadership becomes part of how we deliver.

Mike Farrar

Joint NICS
Board Sponsor



As someone new to the Civil Service, I have been encouraged by the commitment across the organisation to building capability and strengthening leadership. That gives us a strong foundation. In Year 2, it will be important to sustain that development and ensure leaders at every level feel supported to keep growing and adapting.

Grainia Long

Joint NICS
Board Sponsor



DIGITAL UPSKILLING OF THE WORKFORCE

Building digital skills for confident, effective ways of working

We're building digital skills and confidence across the Civil Service so colleagues feel equipped for increasingly digital ways of working. By establishing a clear Digital Capability Framework and expanding accessible learning, we're helping colleagues develop practical skills for their roles. This is enabling teams to make better use of digital tools, adapt to change and work more effectively.

Over the first year of delivery, work has progressed to build digital capability across the Civil Service, supporting staff to work more confidently and effectively in an increasingly digital environment.

A coordinated programme, supported by the Digital Empowered NICS Steering Group and a new Digital Capability Framework, is helping to establish a shared understanding of digital skills across roles. Early work has also explored the role of artificial intelligence in learning, alongside the development of more accessible digital learning opportunities.

Laying the foundations for a digitally empowered Civil Service

The establishment of the Steering Group has strengthened leadership, governance and oversight, ensuring activity is aligned to organisational priorities and delivered in a more structured way.

The Digital Capability Framework provides a clear baseline of the skills, behaviours and confidence required across roles, supporting a more targeted approach to capability building.

In parallel, engagement with internal and external providers is helping to shape a scalable, practical upskilling programme, designed around accessible learning that supports day to day work.

Strengthening digital leadership capability

Recognising the importance of leadership in driving digital change, a Digital Leadership course was introduced for Staff Officer and above. The programme is designed to build confidence and understanding of digital transformation, equipping leaders with the knowledge and skills to support their teams in adopting new ways of working.

Building capability through accessible learning

A key priority has been ensuring digital learning is practical and accessible. Bite-sized learning and targeted interventions are supporting core digital skills in a way that fits alongside day-to-day roles, enabling continuous development across the workforce.

Emer Benson highlighted how the Digital Leadership course is equipping leaders to confidently lead their teams through digital change:

“We’re seeing a powerful shift towards digital ways of working, and it’s an opportunity for us to lead with confidence and bring our teams with us on that journey.”

“The Digital Leadership course gave me real clarity on how we can inspire and empower our teams to embrace technology, unlocking new ways of working and delivering better outcomes every day.”

“Now is the time to lead digitally, champion change, and actively support our teams to make the most of what technology can offer.”

Looking ahead

Year 2 will support the scaling and embedding of digital capability across the Civil Service. Targeted updates and bite-sized learning will be rolled out, aligned to the Digital Capability Framework.

Learning provision will continue to evolve to remain practical and responsive, with further exploration of AI enabled learning. Ongoing improvements to digital learning platforms will also enhance the user experience, ensuring staff can easily access the tools and resources they need.



People increasingly expect to be able to access public services online. In order to be able to meet those expectations we need to build digital capability in the NICS. We’ve laid important groundwork this year in setting out that digital capability means more than just recruiting more IT specialists - although that is part of it - it also means people at all levels being able to understand how digital technologies, including AI, can help them do their jobs more effectively and deliver better services.

The next step will be to build confidence across the Service, helping people apply those skills in their roles and making digital working a more natural part of how we operate.

Ian Snowden

NICS Board Sponsor



EQUIPPING AND SUPPORTING MANAGERS

Supporting managers to lead with confidence, consistency and care

We're strengthening support for managers, recognising the important role they play in shaping everyday experience at work. Through practical guidance, accessible learning and more joined-up systems of support, managers are better equipped to handle people matters consistently and confidently. This is helping to encourage earlier intervention, reduce escalation and support positive, inclusive team environments.

In Year 1, progress has strengthened the support available to line managers, helping them lead with greater confidence and consistency.

Strengthening core capability

Enhanced learning provision, including the Management Approaches Toolkit, provides clearer, more practical guidance on core people management responsibilities.

Targeted resources in areas such as sickness absence and probation support more consistent and timely management, while bite-sized learning offers flexible, accessible support that fits alongside day-to-day responsibilities.

Promoting inclusive and compassionate leadership

Recognising the importance of inclusive and safe leadership, Trauma-Informed Approach eLearning was launched in early 2026 in partnership with the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland. Supported by tailored leadership guidance, this learning equips managers to respond more effectively to complex situations, helping to build trust within teams and reduce escalation of issues.



Strengthening systems and support

Year 1 also saw the restructuring of the Employee Relations (ER) function, strengthening the support available to managers and staff in relation to sickness absence and conduct related matters. Improved coordination across HR, ER, Occupational Health, Welfare and Learning and Development has supported a more joined up approach to employee support.

The launch of the APEX/FACES platform, aligned with the implementation of updated grievance and dignity at work policies, has further strengthened case management arrangements, supporting greater consistency, transparency and effective resolution. In parallel, an in-depth NISRA study into sickness absence commenced, strengthening the evidence base to inform future improvement and underpin enhanced ER management information systems.

Together, these developments are helping to build a more confident and consistent management culture across the Civil Service. Managers are better placed to address issues earlier, navigate complexity and support their teams day-to-day. A more joined-up, data-informed approach is also supporting earlier intervention and improving staff experience across teams and services.

Impact of HR wraparound support

A pilot HR wraparound support model demonstrated the benefits of joined up intervention, resulting in a 41% reduction in stress-related absence in one area, compared with the same period in the previous year.

Looking ahead

Year 2 will build on this foundation with further learning and support for managers, including additional trauma-informed webinars, new courses on managing stress and personal resilience, and the launch of team-based working eLearning to support the development of effective, collaborative and high-performing teams.

Learning to support the implementation of updated Dignity at Work and Grievance policies will also be rolled out, alongside practical guidance and a bespoke manager resource to clearly signpost available learning and support.



Managers shape much of people's experience of working in the Civil Service, so it's important that they feel supported as well as accountable. Year 1 has brought practical improvements in the guidance, learning and support available. The aim is to make that support easy to access, so managers can deal with issues early and lead with confidence.

David Malcolm

NICS Board Sponsor



FAIR TOTAL

REWARD APPROACH

A clearer, fairer and more sustainable approach to reward

We're laying the foundations for a more structured, transparent and sustainable approach to pay and reward. Through strengthened engagement and the development of a strategic framework, we're improving clarity and consistency for staff. This supports recruitment and retention while ensuring reward arrangements remain aligned to affordability and organisational priorities.



Ensuring pay and reward arrangements are fair, transparent and sustainable, and shaped through engagement with Trade Unions has been a priority during the first year.

Work has focused on laying the groundwork for a more structured and sustainable approach to pay and reward across the Civil Service. Alongside this, the 2024 and 2025 pay awards were successfully implemented, including enhancements to contractual maternity and adoption pay and increases to key allowances.

Ministerial approval was secured to consult Trade Unions on a draft Pay and Reward Strategic Framework, supported by ongoing engagement and dialogue to refine proposals.

Detailed analysis, including affordability, costing and equality assessments, has been undertaken to inform a proposed three-year pay deal.

Looking ahead

Subject to budget decisions, work will continue in Year 2 to progress negotiations towards a multi-year pay deal, providing greater clarity and stability for staff.

The Strategic Framework will be refined following consultation and brought forward for approval, alongside preparations for implementation, including governance and delivery arrangements.



A fair approach to pay and reward is central to trust, retention and our ability to attract the talent the Civil Service needs. In a challenging financial context, this year has brought practical progress for staff with the start of a more strategic conversation about the future. The next step is to build on that foundation with arrangements that are clearer, more sustainable and give colleagues greater certainty.

Louise Crilly

NICS Board Sponsor



INTEGR8

Enabling delivery through stronger systems and services

Alongside the key initiatives, a number of enabling programmes are helping to strengthen the systems, processes and infrastructure that support delivery of the People Strategy and enable the organisation to operate effectively.

Integr8 plays a central role in this by transforming and integrating Finance and HR services for the Civil Service to make them more streamlined, consistent, and easier to use, while providing a strong foundation for wider organisational change.

Over the past year, the Integr8 Programme reached an important milestone by completing its Core Design phase and moving into Implementation.

Integr8 will modernise the delivery of Finance and HR services across the Civil Service, creating a better experience for staff through services that are simpler, more flexible, and easier to use.

Key milestones reached

At the heart of the Integr8 Programme is the principle of co-design. Finance and HR colleagues from across the Civil Service have and continue to play a key role in shaping future services to meet the needs of the the organisation.

Key achievements included completion of the Integr8 Delivery Partner procurement and contract award, enabled by securing Full Business Case 2 approval. Procurement for Payroll Administration Services was also launched in December 2025 and is nearing completion.

At the same time, finance operational policies have been developed, and a cross-departmental Finance Operational Policy Approval Group was established. Co-design workshops to progress design across HR, Finance, Service and Organisation Design teams, supported by input from more than 200 subject matter experts across Civil Service Finance and HR business areas. Work was completed on high-level Change Impact Assessments and on the approval of the Integr8 training strategy, helping to lay a strong foundation for the next stage of delivery.

Next steps

Looking ahead, the Programme will focus on preparing for the phased go-live of new Finance and HR services in 2027-28. This will include completing detailed design across all areas, progressing data migration, and developing the testing approach. The Programme will also deliver training and conduct rigorous systems integration and user acceptance testing to ensure the new technology solution is ready for rollout.

Alongside this, work will continue on the submission of Full Business Case 3, the award of the Payroll Administration Services contract, programme change management activities including communications, and the establishment of a new shared service function (Global Business Services).

Paul Duffy, Senior Responsible Owner for the Integr8 Programme, said:



“Integr8 is an important step in improving the services staff rely on and making sure they are fit for the future. It is about creating a better experience for staff through services that are modern, flexible and customer focused.

“Implementation will be rolled out in waves, with Finance services due to go live first from April 2027 and HR services following later in the year.

“Each stage will be carefully planned, with training, clear guidance and practical support to help make the transition as smooth as possible.”



A WORD FROM OUR TRADE UNION COLLEAGUES

Recognising that the most effective solutions are developed through collaboration, partnership with our Trade Union colleagues continues to strengthen delivery of the People Strategy and help shape positive change for the Civil Service workforce.

NIPSA

NIPSA welcomes the constructive engagement with Senior Management in the NICS during the first year of consultation on the NICS People Strategy 2025-2030. NIPSA recognises that the strategy has promising aims and our focus will be on ensuring that it can deliver positive changes for our members across the service.

The Strategy is designed to support the workforce by ensuring that our members are equipped with the right skills and support to deliver quality public services.

NIPSA welcomes the central aspiration of the framework for developing and retaining an effective workforce that values health and well-being and having the right people in the right jobs.

Moving into year two NIPSA will seek to secure meaningful progress particularly regarding the stated key initiatives that will enhance the working lives of our members including strategic workforce planning, supporting managers, career development and fair pay.

Carmel Gates

General Secretary, NIPSA



FDA

The People Strategy sets out a clear and necessary direction for the transformation of the NICS. We've seen progress achieved in its first year and the FDA will continue working with civil service leadership to ensure the strategy delivers meaningful outcomes for staff and the public they serve.

We know that real improvement comes from investing in the people who keep public services running. We welcome the commitment to support staff to develop their skills and build a meaningful career in public service.

This investment is especially important as public services in Northern Ireland continue to operate under sustained financial pressures and wider operational challenges, making a skilled and supported workforce essential to maintaining resilience and quality of service.

The Strategy also provides a constructive framework for positive industrial relations, enabling unions and management to work together to strengthen working conditions and promote equality underpinned by the values of objectivity, impartiality, integrity and honesty. By working collaboratively, we can help ensure the Civil Service remains a supportive, inclusive and high performing place to work.

Robert Murtagh

National Officer, FDA



GMB



From a GMB perspective, the first year of the People Strategy reflects important progress in moving from ambition towards delivery, particularly across the areas of skills, workplace experience, and leadership. The emphasis on system-wide implementation is welcome, and it will be important that this results in consistent improvements for staff across all departments.

GMB acknowledges the ongoing engagement with trade unions and the recognition of their role in representing the workforce. Continued constructive dialogue will be essential as the Strategy develops, with a focus on ensuring that engagement is timely, transparent, and able to inform decision-making.

Meaningful partnership working will help ensure that the experiences and insights of staff are reflected in how changes are designed and delivered.

GMB remains committed to working collaboratively with the Civil Service to support the effective delivery of the People Strategy. A continued focus on staff voice, alongside clear evidence of positive change at an operational level, will be key to building confidence and ensuring the Strategy delivers meaningful benefits for the workforce.

Alan Perry
Senior Organiser
GMB Trade Union

UNITE THE UNION



The People Strategy involves management and trade unions working together to agree a pathway to the modernisation of the Civil Service.

To advance the strategy's objectives and to ensure success in recruitment and retention it is vital that the voice of employees and their trade unions are central to that process.

The People Strategy is a good example of co-production. It demonstrates a collective ambition for a civil service that both delivers for the public and is a rewarding working environment for its employees.

Joanne McWilliams
Regional Officer
Unite the Union



ANNEX A – MEASURING SUCCESS

Measuring the success of the People Strategy requires more than tracking the progress of individual projects and workstreams.

The Strategy is a five-year programme of workforce and organisational change, and its success will ultimately be judged by whether it improves the Civil Service's ability to attract, develop, support and retain the people and capabilities needed to deliver better public services.

In Year 1, measurement has focused on establishing a clear baseline and tracking progress against the two-year implementation roadmap. Delivery has been monitored through regular highlight reporting across the nine key initiatives and six enabling workstreams, with each area reporting progress, milestones, risks, issues and next steps.

This has provided transparency of activity and helped identify areas requiring additional support or escalation. As implementation matures, our approach to measuring success is evolving in four connected ways.

1. We will continue to track delivery progress. This includes monitoring whether key products, policies, frameworks, tools and programmes are delivered to agreed timelines and quality standards. Examples include the delivery of recruitment pilots, the publication of strategic workforce planning guidance, the development of the Job Families and Professions Frameworks, the implementation of renewed HR policies, and progress on leadership, wellbeing, digital capability and manager support interventions.

2. We will measure adoption and use. The Strategy will only make a difference if the products developed are used consistently across departments. This means looking beyond activity completion to assess whether departments, managers, professions and staff are applying new approaches in practice.

For example, this includes the use of strategic workforce planning tools, adoption of revised policies, engagement with manager support products, use of recruitment dashboards, participation in leadership and digital learning, and the extent to which job family and profession arrangements are embedded in workforce planning and HR processes.

3. We will assess maturity and capability development. The People Strategy aims to build long-term organisational capability. The delivery framework will therefore set out the future state for key areas of workforce and organisational capability, including milestones and maturity indicators that show how these capabilities are expected to develop over time. This will help demonstrate whether the Civil Service is moving from early implementation to embedding new ways of working, and ultimately to optimising benefits across the system.

4. We will measure outcomes and impact. Over time, success will be assessed through a combination of workforce metrics, operational indicators and staff insight.

These will include measures such as recruitment timelines, vacancy and workforce data, strategic workforce planning maturity, sickness absence, occupational health performance, learning and development participation and impact, digital capability, employee relations indicators, People Survey results, and evidence of improved employee experience, inclusion, leadership and engagement.

The 2025 People Survey provides an important baseline for understanding staff experience and engagement at the start of implementation. Future surveys, together with departmental people plans and workforce data, will help assess whether the Strategy is contributing to improvements in leadership, inclusion, learning, wellbeing and overall engagement.

The People Strategy delivery framework and delivery plan will further strengthen this approach. The delivery framework will provide the strategic view of the journey to 2030, setting out the outcomes, milestones and maturity indicators expected over the lifetime of the Strategy. The delivery plan will provide the operational control mechanism for tracking progress, managing risks, resolving dependencies and supporting delivery at pace.

This approach recognises that success will not be demonstrated by any single measure. It will be shown through a balanced picture of delivery, adoption, maturity and impact.

In practical terms, the test will be whether the Civil Service has clearer workforce plans, better data, faster and more effective recruitment, stronger professional and career pathways, more confident managers, healthier and more inclusive workplaces, improved leadership capability, and a workforce better equipped to meet current and future demands.

Year 1 has laid the foundations for this measurement approach. Year 2 will focus on strengthening the evidence base, improving reporting consistency, aligning measures with the delivery framework, and ensuring that progress reporting increasingly demonstrates not only what has been delivered but also the difference it is making.

ANNEX B

People Strategy governance arrangements

During the first year of the NICS People Strategy 2025–2030, we have enhanced the governance arrangements established to support delivery, strengthen accountability, and provide clearer oversight of progress, risks, and dependencies.

The NICS Board retains collective ownership of the People Strategy and is responsible for its overall direction and success. Individual Board members sponsor specific initiatives and enablers, providing senior leadership, challenge and support for delivery.

The People Committee provides strategic oversight on behalf of the NICS Board. It reviews overall progress, considers key risks and issues, provides strategic direction, and escalates matters to the NICS Board where required.

A Senior Responsible Owner has been appointed to provide a single point of accountability for the Strategy’s delivery. The SRO is supported by the People Strategy Programme Board, which provides operational oversight of delivery, monitors risks and dependencies, and supports joined-up decision-making across the programme.

The People Strategy Delivery Office has been established to support the SRO and Programme Board. It provides programme management, reporting, risk and dependency tracking, communications coordination and business change support.

Delivery of individual initiatives and enablers remains the responsibility of designated sponsors, Grade 3 leads and project leads. These leads manage delivery plans, milestones, risks and issues within their areas, escalating matters through the Programme Board where required.

Departmental engagement is primarily managed through the Corporate Services Directors Group, supported by structured forward planning of engagement activity. This provides a route for departments to contribute to delivery and for emerging departmental issues to be reflected in programme planning.

These arrangements provide a clear line of accountability from project delivery through to the Programme Board, People Committee and NICS Board, ensuring that the People Strategy is governed as a coordinated, cross-Civil Service programme.

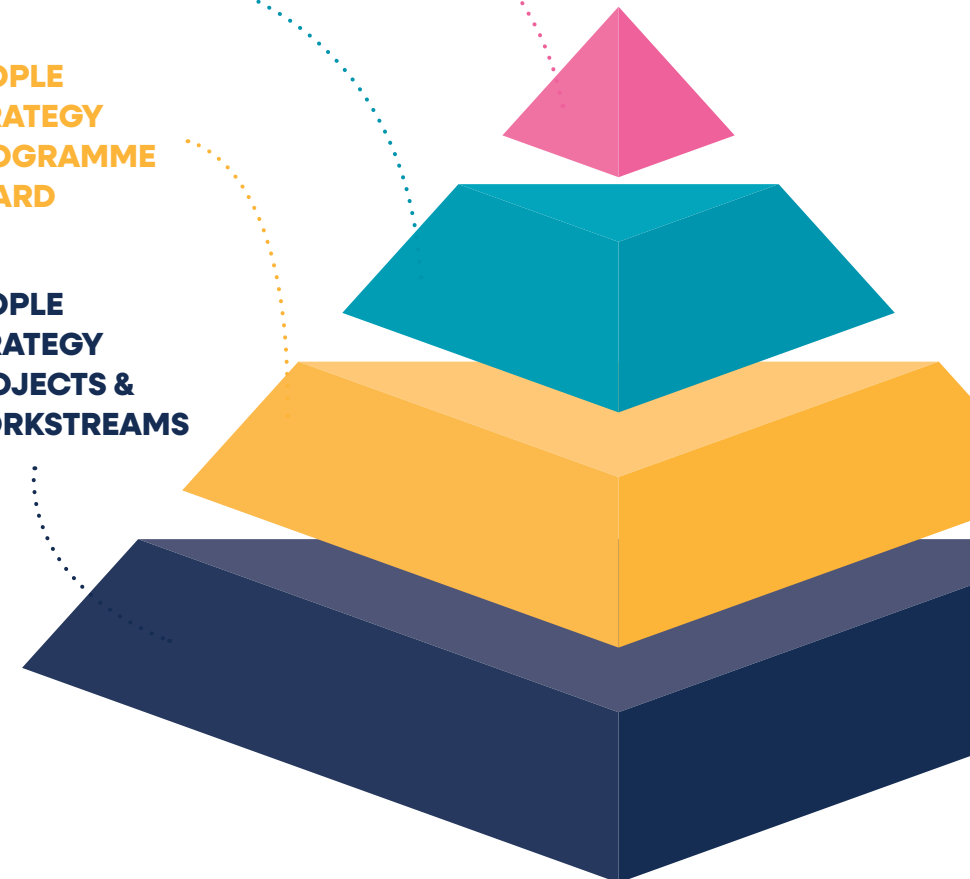
People Strategy governance model

NICS BOARD

PEOPLE COMMITTEE

PEOPLE STRATEGY PROGRAMME BOARD

PEOPLE STRATEGY PROJECTS & WORKSTREAMS



NICS Board Sponsors for People Strategy key initiatives

1. Simplify and Streamline the Recruitment Process

David Malcolm

2. New Corporate Approach to Strategic Workforce Planning

Neil Gibson

3. Digital Upskilling of the Workforce

Ian Snowden

4. Review of Civil Service Professions

Neil Gibson

5. HR Policy Renewal Programme

Katrina Godfrey & Moira Doherty

6. Fair Total Reward Approach in a Pay and Reward Strategy

Louise Crilly

7. Improve Workforce Health and Wellbeing

Hugh Widdis

8. Equip and Support Managers

David Malcolm

9. Building Capability with a Focus on Collective Leadership

Mike Farrar & Grainia Long

