

**The Executive Office
Departmental Response
to recommendations in the Northern Ireland
Audit Office's Report
Overview of the Northern Ireland
Executive's Response to the COVID-19
Pandemic - Third Report**

**Presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly
by the Executive Office**

14 November 2023



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Glossary of Abbreviations

CCG (NI)	Civil Contingencies Group (Northern Ireland)
DoF	Department of Finance
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NICS	Northern Ireland Civil Service
TEO	The Executive Office

THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE DEPARTMENTAL RESPONSE TO NORTHERN IRELAND AUDIT OFFICE (NIAO) RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE NIAO'S REPORT OF 27 JULY 2023 ON "OVERVIEW OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND EXECUTIVE'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC - THIRD REPORT"

The Executive Office

Overview of the Northern Ireland Executive's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic Third Report

Introduction

The responses within this Departmental Response have been made at official level. Where specific recommendations relate to issues of policy these will require Ministerial decisions.

NIAO Recommendation 1

We recommend that oversight and reporting arrangements are in place with the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Board. This will be key to ensuring lessons are learned and shared widely and where appropriate processes are improved and embedded. The NICS Board should ensure that all departments work together to:

- **collect, share and consider findings and good practice, including from individual departmental reviews on the response to the pandemic and the cross-departmental work to evaluate the Executive COVID-19 related grant funding;**
- **identify, understand, and address ongoing challenges and longer-lasting impacts of the pandemic; and**
- **consider the success of the 83 interventions detailed within the Consolidated Covid Recovery Plan.**

The Executive Office (TEO) notes this recommendation.

TEO has been sharing the lessons learned to responding to Covid-19 Pandemic, through the work of the Civil Contingencies Group (Northern Ireland) (CCG (NI)) and the Covid Inquiry Cross Departmental Working Group which both report to the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Board. The cross-departmental Covid-19 Recovery Taskforce referred to below is attended by all departments at Senior Civil Service level. The CCG (NI) is the principal strategic civil contingencies preparedness body for the public sector chaired by the Head of the NI Civil Service in an emergency response and by TEO as part of wider preparedness. CCG (NI) comprises senior level membership from all NICS departments and key civil contingencies stakeholders. These groups provide regular reports to the NICS Board.

A number of reviews were completed regarding responding to the pandemic during the initial response period, which informed the early programme of work. A submission from Civil Contingencies Policy Branch of TEO to the NICS Board in March 2021 set out a focused programme of work to refresh and develop existing guidance into an overarching new framework for civil contingencies in NI. The proposed new approach focused on providing a coordinated strategic risk managed framework for civil contingencies in NI with TEO bringing together all partners and providing strategic direction for the management of a portfolio of NI risks. The Framework has secured the confidence of and is owned across all agencies and partners in NI and remains a live document with further updates in development. All this work has applied the lessons learned which have been identified to date and means that NI's civil contingencies planning operates in a very different environment through the Executive to local government and ultimately, the communities themselves. In August 2021, the new NI Civil Contingencies Framework, Building Resilience Together was published. This Framework marked a significant milestone in the ongoing development of civil contingencies preparedness within NICS and across the many external partners TEO works with. The Framework now reflects the standardised approach to dealing with emergencies through the distinct phases of Prepare, Respond and Recover. Work continues with departments and

partners to identify and mitigate NI strategic risks. TEO will continue to provide updates to the NICS Board on the work of the CCG (NI).

The purpose of the Building Forward: Consolidated Covid-19 Recovery Plan was to accelerate economic, health and societal recovery in the short term so NI could emerge stronger and plan for longer term transformative and innovative change.

Further, the Department of Finance (DoF) has commissioned a Lessons Learned Report which will be completed by external consultants to provide independence in the findings and recommendations. It was agreed that the review will scope the monies disbursed by Executive departments to organisations outside the public sector as grants, including financial payments to private businesses and third sector organisations. The consultants were commissioned through a framework contract established to provide the NICS with access to additional capacity and expertise to deliver tasks related to the response to the Covid pandemic. The Lessons Learned Report had been anticipated in July 2023; however, this timeframe has been revised due to some further work being required. The final paper will be considered and signed off by the Steering Group and will be provided to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry, as soon as available following this.

In addition, TEO will shortly commission an exercise across all departments to identify individual departmental reviews on the response to the pandemic. A paper will be submitted to the NICS Board on this matter.

Regarding the Consolidated Covid-19 Recovery Plan, the cross-departmental Covid-19 Recovery Taskforce has supported the implementation of the Recovery Plan monitoring and reporting on the progress and success of interventions. The Taskforce has met nine times since it was established in September 2021. Four Progress Reports have provided updates on the implementation of the interventions under each of the four Recovery Accelerators. The Fourth Progress Report was approved by the Covid Recovery Taskforce in May 2023 and highlighted positive progress which will help to accelerate job creation and growth, to enhance skills and address inequalities here. The report was presented to the NICS Board to note by correspondence in June 2023.

TEO is giving consideration to producing a closing report now that the 24-month timeframe for the Recovery Plan has expired. This report will be presented to NICS Board in the coming months. Some of the Recovery Plan's interventions will contribute to achieving longer-term strategic objectives in our developing Programme for Government and commitments under New Decade New Approach.

NICS continues to engage and respond to the requirements of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry, which will provide recommendations on good practice and how to respond to a future pandemic. The September NICS Board meeting noted the cross -departmental paper regarding the opportunities that were identified to the NICS as an organisation to work more efficiently and reduce the burden on departments.