

AUDITING FOR IMPROVEMENT:

AUDIT FRAMEWORK AND GUIDANCE

*Ensuring Appointment on Merit
& Supporting Ethical Standards*

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context

The Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland are appointed under the Northern Ireland Constitutional Act 1973. The Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 requires them to ensure that appointment to posts in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) are made on merit, on the basis of fair and open competition, known as the Merit Principle. Commissioners contribute to the development of an effective and impartial Civil Service and play an important role in safeguarding the non-partisanship of the Civil Service, seeking to ensure that recruitment decisions are free from political influence.

Commissioners recognise the central role and importance of the audit function in providing objective information, advice and assurance to the people of Northern Ireland, on the integrity of the appointments process, including merit and non-partisanship. To ensure that the Commissioners are well-placed to satisfy their statutory responsibility, a revised approach for effective auditing against the principle-based Recruitment Code has been developed.

Commissioners discharge their statutory responsibilities by:

- maintaining the principle of selection on merit on the basis of fair and open competition in relation to selection for appointment;
- making General Regulations which prescribe the circumstances in which the Merit Principle shall not apply;
- publishing and maintaining a Recruitment Code on the interpretation and application of the Merit Principle;
- auditing recruitment policies and practices followed in making appointments to the Civil Service to establish whether the Recruitment Code is being observed; and
- requiring the publication of information relating to recruitment and the use of permitted exceptions to the Merit Principle.

Under Article 4(4) of the 1999 Order, Commissioners have a clear duty to conduct independent audits to provide assurances of the integrity of the appointment process. Audit is, therefore, one of the Commissioners' key regulatory functions and a critical element of the range of inter-related oversight tools they employ as set out at Figure 1 overleaf.

References to Commissioners' statutory audit function through-out this document encompass audit and review.

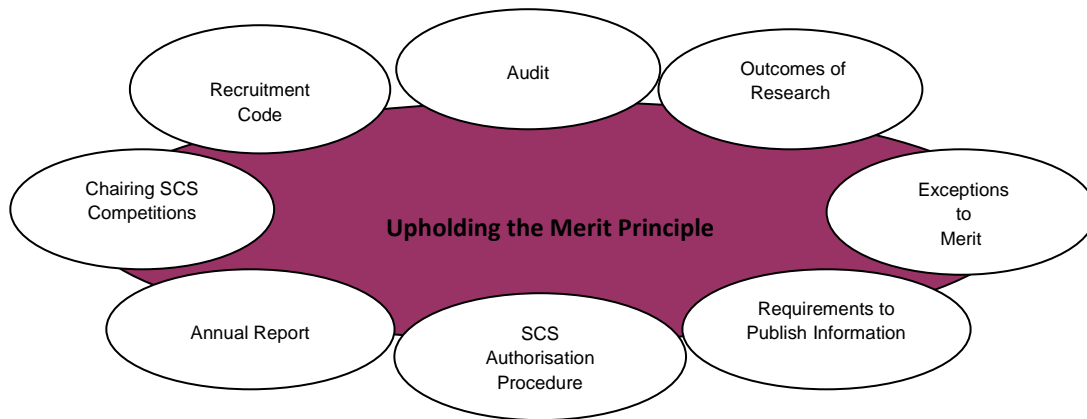


Figure 1: Range of oversight tools

The Commissioners' Recruitment Code sets out four key principles which must be upheld in all aspects of recruitment and selection for appointment to the NICS. The purpose of the audit function is to examine the recruitment policies and practices followed in making appointments to the NICS and to obtain evidence as to whether or not these principles have been upheld, both in spirit and in practice.

The four principles embodied in the Recruitment Code are:

- appointments should be made on merit;
- appointment processes should be fit for purpose;
- appointment processes should be fair and applied with consistency; and
- appointments should be made in an open, accountable and transparent manner.

To support the ability to produce robust, evidence-based and reliable audit findings and recommendations, an Audit Framework (Appendix A) and associated Guidance have been produced and, together, these set out the standards and related advice which govern the conduct of audit reviews.

From 2015/16 Commissioners' approach to audit and review has been further developed to seek assurances on, and influence improvements to, NICS recruitment policies and practices through regular structured engagement with NICSHR.

1.2 Principles of good regulation

Commissioners believe in a system of firm but fair regulation and have adopted the principles outlined in the “Better Regulation Task Force”¹. These key principles which underpin the Commissioners’ approach to audit are reflected below:

Proportionality

Commissioners will endeavour to ensure that audits will be carried out in proportion to the risks or issues identified the seriousness of any breach of the Code and the actions required by the NICS to make improvements.

Consistency

Commissioners will endeavour to ensure that they, and those who work on their behalf, take a consistent approach to the regulation and audit of recruitment and selection practices and procedures. Consistency, however, does not mean uniformity. Commissioners need to take account of the many variables; for instance, the impact of non-compliance; the degree of risk; the nature of the management response; and previous audit findings / recommendations.

Targeting

Commissioners will endeavour to ensure that their limited resources are used appropriately on audit topics which will generally be informed by risk and practices and procedures which may impact on the Merit Principle.

Transparency

Commissioners will endeavour to ensure that audit reports will be based on clear, current and reliable evidence. Commissioners will provide objective information to the NICS about improvements required and the rationale and evidence supporting audit findings and recommendations.

Accountability

Commissioners will be accountable for the conduct and actions of audit teams in the discharge of their statutory audit function. They will endeavour to provide opportunities for mutual learning and the promotion of sustained improvements.

¹ Principles of Good Regulation, Cabinet Office publications, October 2003

1.3 Use of the Guidance

The Audit Guidance sets out the framework, approach, arrangements and advice which guide the conduct of audit reviews.

The purpose of the Guidance is to:

- facilitate the conduct of high quality audits with resulting assurances;
- provide information and advice to those involved in audit;
- promote a high level of audit competence;
- provide a basis for the evaluation of the effectiveness of the audit;
- promote self-assessment and self-improvement in recruitment and selection; and
- enable stakeholders and other interested parties to gain a better understanding of the audit process and standards of conduct.

The Guidance describes the range of audit methodology which Commissioners and others may employ and explains, in broad terms, how audits are selected, planned, conducted and reported.

2. AUDIT – OVERVIEW AND APPROACH

2.1 Audit mandate

The Commissioners' audit mandate extends to all NICS Departments and Agencies and audits may examine any part of recruitment and selection policies, processes and procedures. Audits may focus on individual Departments / Agencies or be carried out on a service-wide basis; and may include reviews of individual competitions. By means of the Audit Framework (**Appendix A**), Commissioners have identified quality standards and indicators which illustrate what they need to know about NICS performance in relation to each provision of the Code and to what extent the requirements of the Recruitment Code are being observed. This list is intended to guide audit and review work, but it is not however exhaustive. The specific aims and objectives for each audit review will be set out in advance.

2.2 Definition of audits

Audits are objective and systematic evaluations of activities which provide independent assessments of the performance and management of the activities under scrutiny. They also provide information, observations and recommendations for the purpose of promoting improvement in performance and outcomes. The Commissioners support the principle of proportionate regulation and, to that end, recognise that audits can and should range widely in scope and approach from comprehensive assessments and evaluations to lighter touch studies and surveys. The methodology employed will be determined by the range, nature and type of audits (**Appendix B**).

2.3 Access to information

NICS Departments and Agencies must co-operate with all audits undertaken by, or on behalf of, Commissioners. Any contracts or arrangements with external providers for relevant recruitment and selection services should also include reference to this requirement.

Information may be sought from NICS HR, Departments and Agencies and relevant external providers of recruitment and selection services. Any such information should be germane to the fulfilment of the Commissioners' audit responsibilities. In view of such access the audit team have a corresponding obligation in respect of confidentiality and disclosure requirements and in accordance with regulations guiding access to information.

2.4 Roles and responsibilities

Audits may be carried out by Commissioners and staff or by those engaged by Commissioners to carry out work on their behalf.

3. DISCHARGING THE AUDIT MANDATE

3.1 Strategic planning context

Identifying and selecting the areas for audit requires a comprehensive knowledge of the NICS, and of relevant recruitment and selection issues, together with sound judgement to ensure that a proportionate risk-based approach is applied and implemented.

The audit identification and selection process is influenced by four key criteria:

- i.) **RELEVANCE** of the proposed topic to the Commissioners' statutory duties, the principles and requirements of the Recruitment Code and overall strategic impact;
- ii.) **RISK** including proportionality, materiality and Governmental or public interests;
- iii.) **RESULTS FOCUS** including the importance to the achievement of Commissioners' statutory responsibilities and priorities and securing sustainable improvements in recruitment and selection; and
- iv.) **RESOURCES** including availability of expertise, complexity and scope of the proposed area, experience of the audit team and operational budgets.

3.2 Strategic Planning Process

The Commissioners have established a robust planning process to ensure that relevant matters of significant risk / impact are addressed in a timely and effective fashion.

The following sets out a brief outline of the process:

- i.) Commissioners' planning cycle begins with an horizon / environmental scan in the third quarter of every year. The scan seeks to identify and assess risks; serves as a basis for identifying audit priorities; and influences the agenda for further consultation with key stakeholders;
- ii.) Commissioners review, shortlist and prioritise audit topics against specific criteria as set out in section 3.3, below, taking into consideration the outcomes and improvements from previous audits;
- iii.) Commissioners will engage with key stakeholders on the proposed audit programme for the following financial year; and
- iv.) Commissioners produce a final audit programme for agreement with NICSHR.

Audit findings and outcomes will contribute to Commissioners' assessment of the extent to which the Merit Principle has been upheld during recruitment and whether the requirements of the Recruitment Code have been met. This will be reported on in their annual report.

3.3 Audit selection and prioritisation

One of the most challenging steps in developing annual and long-range audit plans is the selection and prioritisation process.

This iterative process takes into consideration **criteria** such as:

- significance and importance of the issue;
- acknowledged material breach of the Recruitment Code;
- urgency due to risk;
- availability of audit resources;
- contribution to the Commissioners' priorities;
- specific request or priority identified by Permanent Secretaries Group (PSG), NICS HR, other stakeholders or Commissioners
- current political interest or public concern;
- findings from previous audits;
- requirement to follow-up particular issues;
- cycle or coverage desired / planned; and
- issues that feature strongly in complaints and litigation.

Audits will utilise a wide range of **tools and techniques** for the purposes of deriving well-grounded and authoritative evidence to inform the process of identifying, selecting and prioritising audits including:

- direct observation and evaluation of competitions;
- use of questionnaires and surveys;
- client and service user input;
- stakeholder consultation and events;
- scrutiny and use of data and documentation;
- outcomes of self-assessment exercises;
- outcomes of audits to identify areas of concern or further interest; and
- trends or issues emerging from Tribunal findings, or complaints.

3.4 Balancing the audit programme

The Audit programme and plans will then be considered to determine the balance across:

- the Recruitment Code’s four principles and requirements;
- the Audit Framework, quality standards and expectations;
- Commissioners’ priorities and resources available; and
- legislative and statutory imperatives, including published Codes of Practice.

3.5 Measuring outcomes

Commissioners will review and monitor their approach to audit, review outcomes and the improvements made in relation to the requirements of the Recruitment Code and the standards and expectations set out in the Audit Framework. The findings will be used to inform future planning and prioritisation of audits.

4. CONDUCTING AUDITS

4.1 Standards

The Audit team should:

- exercise due care and sound judgement;
- comprise individuals who are objective and independent;
- have a collective knowledge of the subject matter and have the auditing proficiency to fulfil the requirements of the audit;
- ensure proper supervision of all of its members;
- seek from managers of the area being audited their views about critical elements of the audit, where appropriate;
- identify and secure specialist advice, as required; and
- maintain good communications with all those involved, including Commissioners.

Due care and sound judgement

Due care requires the Audit teams to carry out their work diligently, conscientiously and with rigour. They must exercise sound judgement at all stages of the audit in:

- deciding the nature and extent of the audit;
- setting the audit objectives;
- identifying the relevant sections of the Audit Framework;
- defining the approach, scope and methodology; and
- reporting the issues, conclusions and recommendations.

Objectivity and Independence

The Audit Team must maintain an unbiased view when making decisions about scope, objectives, audit evidence, the significance of observations and conclusions and will not direct the audit towards areas of personal interest or prejudge findings. The findings and report will be informed only by an evaluation of the evidence obtained.

Audit teams should be free from any hindrances to their independence or from conflicts of interest that might impair their impartiality in carrying out their work, making judgments or formulating recommendations.

Audit teams are encouraged to develop and maintain good relations with the NICS, its Departments and Agencies. However, in discharging their statutory responsibility for audit, team members will do so with independence and impartiality.

Competence of the Audit Team

The audit team is required to possess collectively the knowledge, disciplines, skills and experience to carry out the audit effectively. The audit team will have:

- undertaken mandatory, audit specific training;
- knowledge of good audit practice and the ability to apply that knowledge;
- experience and technical skills to deal effectively with the subject matter of the audit;
- knowledge of the Governmental environment and of the organisation(s) being audited;
- knowledge of the various statutory provisions, regulations and policies related to the subject matter of the audit; and
- procedures in place to ensure proper supervision of all its team members.

Working with the NICS management

Good relations between the audit teams and the NICS are built on the basis of mutual respect and trust.

The audit team will seek NICSHR input when:

- planning the audit, identifying responsibility for the activities, associated risks, management concerns and identification of other audits or studies carried out in the area;
- finalising the Terms of Reference to obtain views on the scope, the objectives, approach and methodology;
- gathering evidence and providing analysis of findings to support development of a draft report;
- preparing accurate findings and recommendations based on the information and evidence provided in order to promote self-assessment and continuous improvement;
- preparing a draft audit report, with recommendations, for consideration by Commissioners;
- presenting/ communicating outcomes of the audit to NICS following endorsement and approval by Commissioners;
- seeking a management response and action plan with completion dates to the CSC; and
- preparing the final audit report.

Confidentiality and Security

Commissioners, and those working on their behalf, seek to develop and maintain a relationship of mutual respect and trust with the NICS and will recognise the value and ownership of information received in the course of the audit process. The OCSC will collect, store and use the information provided in the course of the audit process in a manner that is compatible with the Data Protection Act 2018. This will include compliance with the OCSC Information Retention Schedule and, when required to do so, the sharing of information in line with UK Information Access legislation.

Commissioner Arrangements

The audit team will be supported by/ have oversight from Commissioners in the planning of the audit, to provide advice on the process and to participate in initial and final meetings with NICS HR / Departments / Agencies. Commissioners will:

- ensure that the audit team members understand fully the audit objective(s);
- provide appropriate advice to team members;
- ensure good communication throughout the audit process; and
- approve the audit process, the evidence to be collected and the draft report.

Commissioners' responsibilities may be discharged collectively and/or by the appointment of a lead Commissioner.

4.2 Audit Process

The Audit process comprises a cycle of planning, audit and review, reporting and follow-up as outlined in Figure 2 below:

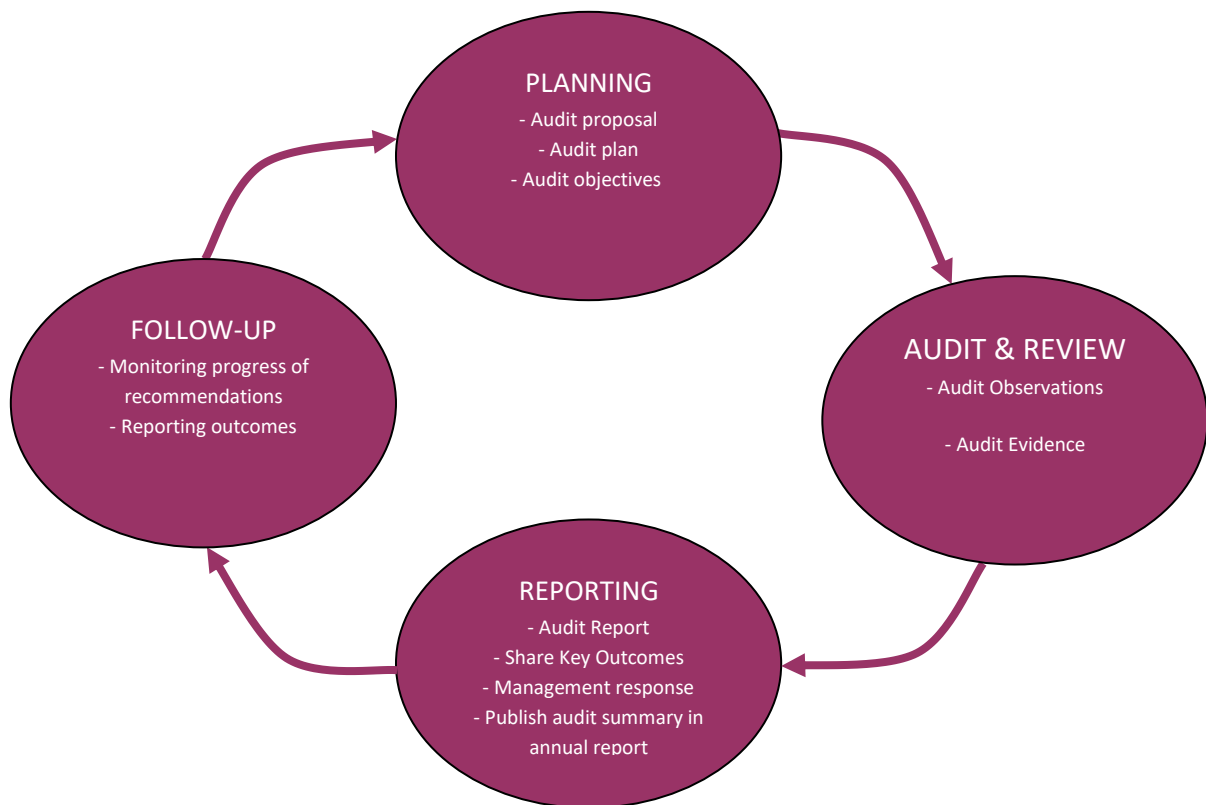


Figure 2

4.2.1 Audit Planning

As part of the audit planning process, the audit teams will ensure an appropriate level of knowledge of the area to be audited, the recruitment and selection activities under examination and the issues facing them. During the planning phase, the audit team will prepare an audit proposal for approval by the Civil Service Commissioners which will outline the audit objectives and scope of the audit including:

- the nature and extent of the audit;
- the audit objectives; and
- the required skills, disciplines and experience of the audit team if necessary.

A letter will be sent advising NICS HR of the intention to conduct an audit in line with the agreed programme of audits.

4.2.2 Audit and Review

Evidence

The purpose of the Audit and Review phase is to gather appropriate and sufficient evidence to support the contents of the audit report. The evidence gathering process involves:

- designing the audit procedures or tests from a range of tools / techniques;
- carrying out the audit procedures or tests to gather evidence;
- analysing evidence and drawing conclusions in accordance with the Audit Framework; and
- making decisions about whether additional advice or information is required.

Audit observations, conclusions and recommendations included in the report must be able to withstand critical examination and must therefore be supported by appropriate, robust and sufficient evidence as set out in **Appendix C**.

Observations and Evaluations

The observations and evaluations are the basis upon which conclusions are formed against each of the audit objectives. Where appropriate, audit observations will be used to confirm satisfactory performance or indicate the level, nature and significance of deviations from criteria and the cause of the problem, if determinable, including its effect on the subject matter of the audit.

The audit team will gather and evaluate evidence to support the assessment of the performance of the recruitment or selection activity in accordance with the Audit Framework criteria. The audit team ensures that any resulting observations and conclusions are relevant, fair and well-founded and that recommendations have the potential to contribute to performance improvements.

4.2.3 Audit reporting

The purpose of the reporting phase is to communicate audit findings, conclusions and recommendations clearly, precisely, persuasively and effectively. Having completed the field audit work, the audit team prepares the draft report. The draft report will be passed to Commissioners for scrutiny and approval. When any necessary amendments have been made, Commissioners will meet to discuss and endorse the key outcomes, recommendations and findings. A letter detailing the key outcomes and recommendations will be prepared and sent to NICS HR. Summary findings from the audits, together with key outcomes against the recommendations, will be published as part of the Commissioners' Annual Report and their Annual Audit Report.

The content of the Audit Report is set out in **Appendix D** and will include:

- the objectives, nature, scope and time period covered by the audit;
- a description of the recruitment related matter or activity that was audited;
- the relevant sections of the Audit Framework;
- the observations made;
- the findings reached regarding each audit objective;

- the level of assurance and the prioritisation of findings where appropriate; and
- the recommendations made in order to promote improvements.

4.2.4 Audit follow-up

Commissioners and the Secretariat will follow up audits to ascertain the extent to which the recommendations made within Audit Reports have been implemented.

The NICS will be asked to provide regular updates to Commissioners detailing the progress made on the implementation of Commissioners' audit recommendations. These updates will be recorded by the Secretariat on the Audit Matrix.

Recommendations will be classified as follows:

- i. Ongoing
- ii. Accepted / Closed
- iii. Not Accepted / Closed

An audit will remain open until all its recommendations have been closed.

If Commissioners are not satisfied that our recommendations have been followed we will initially raise the matter with NICS HR as part of our routine engagement and/or write to the NICS to seek an explanation. Commissioners may then wish to raise the matter with the Permanent Secretary or Agency Chief Executive concerned. Where this did not produce the required action, Commissioners may wish to raise the matter with the Head of the Civil Service and/ or Minister.

Commissioners will also consider whether any delay or failure to implement agreed audit recommendations is in contravention of the requirements set out in Commissioners' Recruitment Code and may decide to make comment in the audit opinion published in their annual report.

5. COMMITMENT TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

In discharging our statutory duty to audit, Commissioners will demonstrate commitment to learning and continuous improvement by means of challenge, review consultation and advice. They will continue to welcome and seek views from stakeholders and interested parties on all aspects of the audit process.

AUDIT FRAMEWORK – PART 1

Key Performance Questions

The audit framework is in two parts and derives from the principles and requirements of the Recruitment Code.

Part 1 sets out the key performance questions (KPQs) which define what Commissioners need to know about NICS performance in relation to each dimension of the framework.

Requirements of the Code	Principles of the Recruitment Code			
	Merit	Fit for Purpose	Fair	Open/Transparent
1. Job Analysis	<p>To what extent does job analysis reflect the current and future requirements of the post?</p> <p>To what extent does job analysis serve the Merit Principle in assisting in differentiating adequately between candidates?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that job analysis is applied consistently at all levels?</p> <p>To what extent is job analysis carried out to agreed quality standards?</p>	<p>To what extent does job analysis give proper consideration to the issues of equality, diversity and inclusivity?</p>	<p>To what extent are the requirements of the job clear, accessible and readily understood by both potential and actual internal and external candidates?</p>
2. Attracting Candidates	<p>To what extent is the actual pool of candidates representative of the potential pool of eligible candidates?</p> <p>What evidence is there that in making further appointments from existing merit lists, the NICS upholds the Merit Principle and adheres to the requirements of the Code?</p>	<p>To what extent does the NICS attract the widest possible pool of candidates of the calibre required to meet its current and future needs?</p>	<p>To what extent are career opportunities in the NICS understood by and accessible to, all sections of the community?</p> <p>To what extent do policies and practices promote diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity to enable the NICS to attract the widest pool of candidates?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that potential and actual barriers to broad appeal are identified and removed and that appropriate outreach measures are in place?</p> <p>To what extent do all means of communication with potential candidates promote confidence in the recruitment process and encourage applications?</p>

Requirements of the Code	Principles of the Recruitment Code			
	Merit	Fit for Purpose	Fair	Open/Transparent
3. Selecting and Assessing candidates	<p>To what extent do the eligible and / or shortlisted candidates reflect both the potential and actual pool of candidates?</p> <p>To what extent do selection and assessment methodologies serve and safeguard the Merit Principle?</p> <p>To what extent are conflicts of interest considered?</p>	<p>To what extent are those selected for panels sufficiently diverse, expert and professionally qualified to ensure appointment on Merit?</p> <p>To what extent do selection and assessment procedures ensure selection on the basis of merit, reflect good practice and promote public confidence in recruitment to the NICS?</p>	<p>To what extent are selection and assessment processes fair and consistent?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that candidate information and documentation reflect good practice, comply with legislation and are free from bias?</p> <p>How transparent and open is the NICS in its dealings with candidates at all stages of the recruitment process?</p>
4. Appointing Candidates (following selection)	<p>To what extent are appointments made in order of merit? (at all levels)</p>	<p>What evidence is there that public confidence in recruitment to the NICS is promoted and enhanced during this process?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that the appointments process does not impact adversely on particular groups?</p>	<p>What evidence is there that both successful and unsuccessful candidates are kept well informed at all stages of the appointments process?</p>
5. Exceptions to Merit	<p>To what extent are appointments by way of exception to the Merit Principle warranted?</p> <p>What evidence is there</p>	<p>What evidence is there that all exceptions to the Merit Principle are monitored and managed appropriately as part of Departmental accountability</p>	<p>What evidence is there that due regard is given to the potential for unfair treatment of those who are not given the opportunity to be</p>	<p>To what extent does the NICS provide public assurance that appointments by exception are rare and warranted?</p>

Requirements of the Code	Principles of the Recruitment Code			
	Merit	Fit for Purpose	Fair	Open/Transparent
	that such exceptions are rare?	arrangements?	considered for the appointment in question?	
6. Ministerial Involvement	To what extent can the NICS demonstrate that Ministerial involvement is accommodated within a process which ensures that the appointment is made on the basis of merit and is free from personal and political patronage or partiality?	To what extent is Ministerial involvement consistent with the provisions of the Code?	To what extent can the NICS reassure the public that the Merit Principle has been upheld and the process has been free from political influence?	What evidence is there that the Minister's role and contribution are reflected and recorded clearly as an integral part of the process?
7. Training	What evidence is there that all those involved in recruitment are trained to agreed quality standards?	What evidence is there that those involved in selection and recruitment have the necessary and appropriate level of knowledge, skills and experience?	What evidence is there that training demonstrates a real commitment to diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity?	To what extent is recruitment and selection training available and accessible to all relevant staff?
8. Communication	What evidence is there that communication with candidates reflects and supports the Merit Principle?	What evidence is there that there is effective communication between all those involved in the process?	To what extent is there fair, effective and timely communication with candidates at all stages of the process?	What evidence is there that communication with candidates is comprehensive, accurate and helpful?
9. Publication of	To what extent does the	To what extent can the	What evidence is there	What evidence is there

Requirements of the Code	Principles of the Recruitment Code			
	Merit	Fit for Purpose	Fair	Open/Transparent
Recruitment Information	published information, which has been specified, enable Commissioners to make an assessment that the merit principle has been upheld?	public be assured that systems are in place to ensure that selection is made in accordance with the Recruitment Code?	that the information / data is analysed appropriately and the analysis used to inform future recruitment practice?	that published information / data is valid, accurate, accessible, timely and relevant?
10. Management Arrangements / Quality Assurance	To what extent do the management and quality assurance arrangements for recruitment demonstrate effective adherence to the Code?	<p>To what extent are the design and deployment of management and quality assurance processes consistent with good practice in an organisation of the size and complexity of the NICS</p> <p>To what extent does senior management give regular attention to strategic recruitment issues?</p> <p>What evidence is there that measures are in place to ensure that all those involved in the recruitment process are suitably qualified and appropriately skilled?</p>	What evidence is there that the NICS takes measures to ensure that recruitment policies and practices are fair and impartial?	To what extent are there measures in place to ensure that management arrangements and quality assurance standards are open and transparent and shared with key stakeholders?

Requirements of the Code	Principles of the Recruitment Code			
	Merit	Fit for Purpose	Fair	Open/Transparent
		What evidence is there that the proper completion and retention of all records supports each stage of the process and promotes the Merit Principle?		

AUDIT FRAMEWORK PART 2

Key Performance Questions and associated Key Performance Indicators

The audit framework is in two parts and derives from the principles and requirements of the Recruitment Code.

Part 2 sets out a menu of key performance questions, together with the associated key performance indicators (KPIs). KPIs “answer” KPQs and provide evidence and information which enable Commissioners to understand to what extent the requirements of the Code are being observed.

1. JOB ANALYSIS

MERIT

To what extent does job analysis reflect the current and future requirements of the post?

- the current and future requirements and demands of the post are considered and reflected in the job description and person specification;
- as appropriate, the requirement to use the merit list to fill additional posts is considered and reflected adequately in the job description, person specification and eligibility criteria.

To what extent does job analysis serve the Merit Principle in assisting in differentiating adequately between candidates?

- the person specification reflects closely the skills, behaviours and attributes required for highly effective performance.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

What evidence is there that job analysis is applied consistently at all levels?

- analysis of a stratified random sample of competitions demonstrates the consistent application of job analysis.

To what extent is job analysis carried out to agreed quality standards?

- engagement and consultation with the appropriate range of stakeholders takes place;
- the key elements of the job are identified and weighted appropriately.

FAIR

To what extent does job analysis give proper consideration to the issues of equality, diversity and inclusivity?

- issues of equality, diversity and inclusivity are considered actively at each stage of the job analysis process;
- the outcome of the job analysis is not actually or potentially unfair to any group.

OPEN / TRANSPARENT

To what extent are the requirements of the job clear, accessible and readily understood by both potential and actual internal and external candidates?

- pro-active measures ensure that job descriptions and person specifications are readily and well understood;
- Internal and external candidates have a clear understanding of the requirements of the job description and person specification;
- a post competition review is undertaken to elicit the views of actual and potential candidates.

2. ATTRACTING CANDIDATES

MERIT

To what extent is the actual pool of candidates representative of the potential pool of eligible candidates?

- evaluation of previous data is used to inform affirmative action measures;
- comparative analysis between the actual and potential applicant pools is undertaken and any imbalances identified.

What evidence is there that in making further appointments from existing merit lists, the NICS upholds the Merit Principle and adheres to the requirements of the Code?"

- where it is known at the outset of a competition that more than one vacancy exists, details of all such vacancies are communicated clearly to potential applicants in all advertising and candidate information;
- where specific additional vacancies are not known at the outset, all advertising and candidate information states explicitly and prominently that the merit list may be used to fill posts with similar duties and responsibilities in any of the NICS Departments; the post advertised and any future vacancies stipulate the same eligibility requirements;
- in such circumstances, the NICS communicates clearly to all potential candidates that they should not be dissuaded from applying for a vacancy solely on the basis that they are not interested in the particular post / Department identified for the purposes of the advertised competition;
- both external and internal candidates understand equally how the process of making further appointments from existing merit lists operates in practice;
- where it is intended to use a merit list to make further appointments, all panel members are aware of and understand the implications of this decision.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

To what extent does the NICS attract the widest possible pool of candidates of the calibre required to meet its current and future needs?

- consideration is given to ensuring that advertising is effective in reaching the widest pool of candidates;
- a sufficient pool of quality candidates is available for selection and appointment at all levels;
- measures to attract candidates are innovative and reflect good practice;
- where executive search is used consultants have been aware of and adhere to the requirements of the Recruitment Code and the NICS Policies and Procedures Manual;
- a thorough evaluation of the numbers and quality of applicants at each stage of the assessment process is carried out following all competitions.

FAIR

To what extent are career opportunities in the NICS understood by and accessible to, all sections of the community?

- career opportunities are understood by and accessible to all potential and eligible candidates;
- candidate information and briefing materials are accessible and free from bias;
- candidate information and briefing materials correspond closely with both the job description and person specification and assessment process to be used.

To what extent do policies and practices promote diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity to enable the NICS to attract the widest pool of candidates?

- effective measures are taken to address under-representation at all levels.

OPEN / TRANSPARENT

What evidence is there that potential and actual barriers to broad appeal are identified and removed and that appropriate outreach measures are in place?

- potential and actual barriers are identified;
- outreach measures are demonstrably effective;
- calibre and diversity of candidates are improved through the removal of barriers.

To what extent do all the means of communication with potential candidates promote confidence in the recruitment process and encourage applications?

- potential candidates find the recruitment-related materials clear, accessible and easily understood;
- numbers and quality of applicants improve.

3. SELECTING AND ASSESSING CANDIDATES

MERIT

To what extent do the eligible and / or shortlisted candidates reflect both the potential and actual pool of candidates?

- analysis and evaluation of data is carried out routinely for all competitions;
- comparative analysis between the eligible and shortlisted candidates and the actual and potential applicant pools is undertaken and any imbalances identified.

To what extent do selection and assessment methodologies serve and safeguard the Merit Principle?

- selection and assessment methodologies are appropriate to test the full range of the requirements of the post;
- selection and assessment methodologies have proven reliability and validity;
- selection and assessment methodologies enable clear differentiation between candidates and ensure the person(s) selected best meets the requirements of the post;
- as appropriate, the requirement to use the merit list to fill additional posts is taken into consideration when developing and designing all elements of the selection and assessment process.

To what extent are conflicts of interest considered?

- all conflicts of interest including knowledge of candidates, either personal or professional are recorded and considered;
- NICS and Departments take steps in order to provide public assurance that panels are independent, impartial and objective.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

To what extent are those selected for panels sufficiently diverse, expert and professionally qualified to ensure appointment on Merit?

- nature and composition of selection panels are monitored;
- membership of panels are refreshed and varied, as appropriate;
- follow up action is taken as required.

To what extent do selection and assessment procedures ensure selection on the basis of merit, reflect good practice and promote public confidence in recruitment to the NICS?

- job descriptions and person specifications are identified, considered and endorsed by appropriate sponsors at the earliest stages;
- job descriptions and person specifications are informed and supported by job analysis and are reflected consistently throughout the selection process;
- selection criteria are clear, objective, fair and derived directly from the key requirements of the job description and person specification;
- application forms are clear, accessible and do not make unfair or unreasonable demands on applicants;
- interview questions are clear, objective, fair and are derived directly from the job description and person specification and provide a rigorous test of the requirements of the post;
- clear, meaningful and transparent reasons for satisfying / not satisfying eligibility and / or shortlisting criteria are recorded in full;
- selection criteria promote the principles of diversity, inclusivity, and equality of opportunity;
- selection and assessment processes are timely and do not result in undue delay.

FAIR

To what extent are selection and assessment processes fair and consistent?

- significant disparities in past success rates between groups, potential adverse impact and diversity issues are considered and addressed in advance;
- selection processes, including application forms do not disadvantage any particular applicant group;
- actions are taken to ameliorate adverse impact;
- policies and practices ensure that candidates with disabilities receive reasonable adjustments;
- candidate assessment booklets are completed in a clear and thorough manner by all panel members and are sufficient to enable meaningful and purposeful feedback.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

What evidence is there that candidate information and documentation reflect good practice, comply with legislation and are free from bias?

- information and briefing materials enable candidates to understand clearly the selection and assessment process, what is expected of them and how selection procedures and assessment methodologies are applied.

How transparent and open is the NICS in its dealings with candidates at all stages of the recruitment process?

- relevant points of contact are identified clearly at all stages;
- comments, enquiries, complaints are dealt with in a timely and helpful manner;
- feedback is clear, useful and meaningful.

4. APPOINTING CANDIDATES (FOLLOWING SELECTION)

MERIT

To what extent are appointments made in order of merit? (at all levels)

- the interval of time between selection and appointment is such that it does not impact adversely on merit;
- an analysis of uptake applicant groups is carried out;
- where the competition is used to fill future vacancies with similar duties and responsibilities at SCS level, the subsequent appointment is made in a fair and timely manner and Commissioners' approval process is satisfied.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

What evidence is there that public confidence in recruitment to the NICS is promoted and enhanced during this process?;

- offers of appointment are timely and not subject to undue delay;
- the appointments process does not impact adversely on the appointment of the most meritorious candidate(s).

FAIR

What evidence is there that the appointments process does not impact adversely on particular groups?

- terms and conditions are consistent with those set out in the Candidate Information Booklet;
- the appointments process accommodates reasonable adjustments;
- prior to making further appointments from an existing merit list, due consideration is given to the potential impact of the passage of time on the marketplace and, thereby, the field of potential applicants.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

What evidence is there that both successful and unsuccessful candidates are kept well informed at all stages of the appointments process?

- communication with candidates is clear, timely and helpful;
- regular communication ensures candidates are kept up-to-date with the progress of the appointment;
- communication with candidates promotes confidence in recruitment to the NICS.

5. EXCEPTIONS TO MERIT

MERIT

To what extent are appointments by way of exception to the Merit Principle warranted?

- Departments record a strong and compelling case to depart from the Merit Principle
- requests for appointment are clearly and demonstrably based on legislative or business imperatives;
- Departments have exhausted all other possibilities in reaching the decision to depart from the Merit Principle;
- Departments present clear justification as to why it is not reasonable or practicable to make the appointment in question by way of an open competition;
- those appointed under Regulation 3(d) are demonstrably recognised for their excellence and / or unique abilities in a particular field and the expertise is not otherwise available in the NICS;
- Departmental application of exceptions give appropriate consideration to the obligation to ensure compliance with relevant employment and equality legislation and statutory codes of practice;
- where a Department makes an appointment under one of the categories of exception to the Merit Principle detailed in the Recruitment Code, NICS HR monitors, reports and quality assures such decisions across the NICS.

What evidence is there that such exceptions are rare?

- nature, frequency, number and pattern of exceptions by Department and across the NICS are recorded;
- analysis of patterns and trends is carried out;
- NICS Departments take steps to reduce the likelihood of the future use of exceptions.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

What evidence is there that all exceptions to the Merit Principle are monitored and managed appropriately as part of Departmental accountability arrangements?

- those persons who transfer in to the NICS were selected originally on Merit;
- secondees and appointees are assessed formally as being capable of undertaking effectively the duties of the post and records are kept as to how that assessment is made, as applicable;
- appointments are made in accordance with the categories as set out in Regulation 3;
- circumstances and reasons are recorded clearly;
- planning and management arrangements take account of the fixed term nature of appointments, as applicable;
- persons who have completed a secondment are not re-appointed as a secondee for a period of at least that of the original secondment;
- arrangements are in place ensure that an effective skills transfer takes place, where appropriate;
- arrangements are in place to fill the post by open competition at the earliest opportunity, where appropriate.

FAIR

What evidence is there that due regard is given to the potential for unfair treatment of those who are not given the opportunity to be considered for the appointment in question?

- Departments demonstrate that they examine and eliminate all other possibilities;
- Departments identify the impact of and potential for unfair treatment;
- Departments scope and consider the potential pool of candidates;

- formal assessment and selection procedures are demonstrably fair and based on the requirements of the post;
- records are kept on how suitability for appointment has been assessed.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

To what extent does the NICS provide public assurance that appointments by exception are rare and warranted?

- details of the appointments made under Regulation 3 are clear, readily accessible and understood;
- details of appointments made under Regulation 3 are published by the NICS under the Commissioners' requirements.

6. MINISTERIAL INVOLVEMENT

MERIT

To what extent can the NICS demonstrate that Ministerial involvement is accommodated within a process which ensures that the appointment is made on the basis of merit and is free from personal and political patronage or partiality?

- all final decisions rest with the Panel;
- recruitment decisions are free from political influence and safeguard the non-partisanship of the Civil Service.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

To what extent is Ministerial involvement consistent with the provisions of the Code?

- Ministers receive appropriate training in the recruitment and selection process prior to involvement;
- the nature and extent of Ministerial involvement is recorded by Departments and does not exceed the provisions of the Code;
- all relevant documentation including the merit list, is referred to Commissioners before the name of the lead candidate is provided to the Minister.

FAIR

To what extent can the NICS reassure the public that the Merit Principle has been upheld and the process has been free from political influence?

- the Minister is provided, in writing with only the name of the candidate placed first on the merit list;
- the Minister does not meet the candidate placed first on the merit list prior to appointment;
- the appointment process is not subject to undue delay.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

What evidence is there that the Minister's role and contribution are clearly reflected and recorded as an integral part of the process?

- documentation details clearly the specific role and contribution of the Minister at all relevant stages;
- Ministerial involvement is identified in the job information;
- any decision not to endorse a lead candidate is recorded and explained.

7. TRAINING

MERIT

What evidence is there that all those involved in recruitment are trained to agreed quality standards?

- training provides an understanding of, and promotes adherence to, the Code and its four principles;
- training evaluates the extent of learning and knowledge, and application of the Code and its requirements.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

What evidence is there that those involved in selection and recruitment have the necessary and appropriate level of knowledge, skills and experience?

- appropriate training is available and delivered on a timely basis to all those involved in the recruitment and selection process;
- training covers not only the structure of the process, but also the skills involved and the recruitment context;
- training is responsive to need, refreshed regularly and is delivered to a consistent standard reflecting good practice;
- training includes awareness and understanding of roles and responsibilities and functions of key contributors at each stage of the process;
- training is undertaken by each contributor and panel member prior to their involvement in the recruitment and selection process;
- training is monitored and evaluated regularly, with regard to its quality and efficacy and the necessary follow up action taken.

FAIR

What evidence is there that training demonstrates a real commitment to diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity?

- training addresses equality and diversity considerations, outreach measures, adverse impact, fair participation and relevant legislation;
- training involves appropriate use of a wide range of assessment tools and techniques, including the application and interpretation of tests.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

To what extent is recruitment and selection training available and accessible to all relevant staff?

- NICS and Departments monitor and evaluate training uptake to ensure fair participation at all levels;
- pro-active measures are taken to address any imbalances.

8. COMMUNICATION

MERIT

What evidence is there that communication with candidates reflects and supports the Merit Principle?

- both internal and external candidates consider recruitment related communications to be fair, open, timely and effective;
- as appropriate, communication with candidates is clear and explicit about the intention to use the merit list to make further appointments and about the reasons and process for doing so.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

What evidence is there that there is effective communication between all those involved in the process?

- panels are provided with appropriate professional HR advice and guidance at key stages of the process;
- there is a clear and shared understanding of respective roles and responsibilities;
- the requirements of the Recruitment Code are understood and applied by all;
- panel members or other key contributors are given specific opportunity to raise concerns about any aspect of a competition;
- panel members have equal and shared access to competition related information.

FAIR

To what extent is there fair, effective and timely communication with candidates at all stages of the process?

- candidates receive clear, purposeful, and meaningful feedback;
- provision of feedback is timely and promotes confidence in recruitment to the NICS;
- all communications are equally accessible to both internal and external candidates and all Section 75 groups.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

What evidence is there that communication with candidates is comprehensive, accurate and helpful?

- candidates find the communication at each stage of the process to be clear, informative and beneficial;
- comments, enquiries and / or complaints are dealt with in an efficient, appropriate and timely manner;
- learning drawn from comments / enquiries / complaints is applied for the purpose of improvement.

9. PUBLICATION OF RECRUITMENT INFORMATION

MERIT

To what extent does the published information which has been specified enable Commissioners to make an assessment that the Merit Principle has been upheld?

- validated information is available to Commissioners to enable assessment of adherence to the requirements of the Code;
- the information provided indicates that selection was made on the basis of merit;
- the information published complies with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

To what extent can the public be assured that systems are in place to ensure that selection is made in accordance with the Recruitment Code?

- timely and effective monitoring of adherence to policies and practices is undertaken;
- details of exceptions to merit are recorded and monitored;
- statistical summaries of all recruitment activity, analysed by Section 75 categories, are published;
- actions and initiatives are undertaken in the reporting year to attract candidates and promote diversity;
- actions and initiatives undertaken in the reporting year to target areas of specific under-representation;
- a report on the outcomes as a result of actions or initiatives taken.

FAIR

What evidence is there that the information / data is analysed appropriately and to what extent is the analysis used to inform future recruitment practice?

- thorough analysis is carried out routinely and regularly at all levels and grades;
- recruitment practice is better informed and improved;
- Section 75 monitoring takes place on a multi-dimensional basis.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

To what extent is the published information / data valid, accurate, accessible, timely and relevant?

- published information meets the requirements of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics;
- published information is timely and meets the requirements as specified by Commissioners.

10. MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS \ QUALITY ASSURANCE

MERIT

To what extent do the management and quality assurance arrangements for recruitment demonstrate effective adherence to the Code?

- measures are in place to ensure that policies and practices comply with legislation and are consistent with the Recruitment Code;
- the NICS actively develops and applies innovative approaches to ensure that recruitment processes better promote the Merit Principle;
- NICS employs benchmark evidence to determine whether or not its recruitment policy and practice can be regarded as excellent for an organisation of its size and complexity;
- management and quality assurance arrangements lead to marked improvements;
- Commissioners' expectations in relation to the practice of filling additional posts from existing merit lists are reflected appropriately in all relevant NICS policy advice and guidance materials, and all those involved in the recruitment / selection process are aware of these.

FIT FOR PURPOSE

To what extent are the design and deployment of management and quality assurance processes consistent with good practice in an organisation of the size and complexity of the NICS?

- the design of management and quality assurance processes is informed by benchmarking against "best in class" organisations;
- robust and effective management and quality assurance processes are applied to all elements and stages of recruitment;
- management and quality assurance processes are the subject of internal audit;
- effective competition evaluation identifies and disseminates lessons learned.

To what extent does senior management give regular attention to strategic recruitment issues;

- PSG considers regularly the effectiveness and business benefit of recruitment policies and practices;
- PSG provides service-wide leadership in progressing diversity, inclusivity and equality of opportunity in recruitment;
- Departmental Boards consider recruitment-related risk and governance issues on a regular basis.

What evidence is there that measures are in place to ensure that all those involved in the recruitment process are suitably qualified and appropriately skilled?

- specific roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and understood;
- training outcomes are evaluated and used to inform future practice;
- evidence is available to confirm required qualifications;
- competition evaluations record that panels receive appropriate professional HR expertise and guidance at key stages of the recruitment and selection process;
- competition evaluations are analysed and learning applied.

What evidence is there that the proper completion and retention of all records, supports each stage of the process and promotes the Merit Principle

- relevant accurate documentation and data are readily available and accessible to the Commissioners for the purposes of Audit;
- records and documentation are of the required quality and standard;

- records and documentation facilitate an assessment of fairness and consistency at all stages of the process;
- records and documentation are clear and easily understood by all.

FAIR

What evidence is there that the NICS takes measures to ensure that Recruitment Policies and Practices are fair and impartial?

- reporting mechanisms for all conflicts of interest, either actual or perceived, are in place and recorded information is sufficient to enable oversight and if required, action;
- monitoring and evaluation demonstrate that policies and practices do not discriminate unlawfully;
- monitoring and evaluation demonstrate that policies and practices satisfy all legislative statutory code requirements;
- monitoring and evaluation of tribunal findings and outcomes and other recruitment related complaints / appeals inform policy and practice.

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

To what extent are there measures in place to ensure that management arrangements and quality assurance standards are open and transparent and shared with key stakeholders?

- steps are taken to ensure that those involved in the recruitment process are familiar with the requirements of Code;
- measures are taken to ensure that records and documentation are readily available and accessible for the purposes of audit;
- management arrangements and quality standards are published and made available to all key stakeholders.

RANGE, NATURE AND TYPES OF AUDIT

The list below is illustrative of the range, nature and types of audit practice which may be employed:

- analysis
- appraisal
- assessment
- check
- discussion
- evaluation
- examination
- inspection
- investigation
- probe
- review
- scrutiny
- study
- survey

All of these methods are acceptable and effective, according to need and subject matter under scrutiny.

AUDIT EVIDENCE

Appropriate Evidence

For evidence to be appropriate, the information must be relevant, reliable and valid.

Relevance refers to the extent to which the information bears a clear and logical relationship to the audit criteria and objectives.

Reliability refers to determining the same findings either when the audit test is repeated, or when information is obtained from other sources.

Validity refers to whether the information actually is what it purports to be in relation to content, origin and timing.

Sufficient evidence

The concepts of sufficient (quantity) and appropriate (quality) evidence are interrelated. The quantity of evidence is sufficient if, when taken as a whole, its weight is adequate to provide persuasive support for the contents of the audit report. In exercising professional judgement, auditors will ask themselves whether the collective weight of the evidence that exists would be enough to persuade a reasonable person that the observations and conclusions are valid and that the recommendations are appropriate.

Sources and types of audit evidence

There are three broad sources for the information that constitutes audit evidence;

- information gathered by the audit team (primary evidence)
- information gathered by the audited organisation (secondary evidence)
- information gathered by third parties (secondary evidence)

Forms of Evidence

Audit evidence may take a variety of forms:

- physical evidence – typically obtained by the auditors' direct inspection or observations and supported by field notes etc. wherever possible;
- testimonial evidence – includes oral or written statements obtained in response to the audit team's enquiries;
- documentary evidence – evidence obtained from such sources as files, performance reports, databases, minutes of meetings, organisation charts and correspondence; and
- analytical evidence – from manipulating other types of evidence using analytical techniques such as computations, comparisons, and content analysis of qualitative data.

Taking account of the work of others

In the interests of audit efficiency, audit teams will take account of the relevant work of internal audit and review, internal and external experts, and specialists as appropriate.

CONTENT OF AUDIT REPORTS

The following information sets out the key content components of the Regulatory Audit reports.

- **Objectives** – clearly set out the key questions about the recruitment or selection practice/process that the audit sets out to answer;
- **Timing** – inform readers of the period of time for which assurance is being given in the audit report, to assure them that the report is dealing with issues of current interest;
- **Nature and Scope** – set out what was audited, the extent of the audit and any limitations;
- **Description of the Activity** – provide sufficient context and background material to enable readers to understand the issues and obtain a perspective on the audited activity;
- **Criteria** – identify the basis for measuring performance and the sources of the criteria drawn from the Code and Audit Framework;
- **Observations** – sufficient, relevant and appropriate analysis and information to ensure an understanding of the issue. The observations highlight the significance of the issue by describing the impact on the quality of performance or by quantifying the problem.
- **Findings** – outline the assessment of performance against each audit objective, including where necessary, any qualifications.
- **Level of Assurance** – where appropriate state the level of assurance by using recognised and accepted methods that is being provided by the work; and
- **Recommendations** – provide for management response, action plan with completion dates in order to guide the action needed to address any issues or correct any problems.