



ACCESSNI PERFORMANCE AND ACTIVITY REPORT

1 APRIL 2021 - 31 MARCH 2022

Glossary:	
Basic Check:	Provides unspent criminal record information. Cost is £18.
Standard Check:	Provides both spent and unspent criminal record information. The “position applied for” must be exempt from Rehabilitation of Offenders legislation. Cost is £18.
Enhanced Check:	As per Standard checks, plus relevant police “non-conviction” information and where eligible, check of lists of those barred from working with vulnerable groups. The “position applied for” must be prescribed in AccessNI Regulations. Cost is £33 (free to volunteers).

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Section 1 - Introduction

1. This document sets out details of AccessNI's activity over the 12 month period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022, noting performance against targets and where appropriate, providing a comparison to previous years.
2. 2021/22 saw a significant uplift in the volume of disclosure applications submitted to AccessNI, leading to the busiest operational year ever for the Branch. The general assessment is that this increase in demand was largely as a result of organisations adjusting their recruitment position as covid regulations were relaxed. There also continues to be a high demand for Enhanced checks for positions in the Health and Education sectors, along with a 30%+ increase in demand for Basic checks (based on pre-Covid volumes).
3. As with many NI Civil Service staff, AccessNI staff adopted a hybrid working arrangement during the year, combining working from home with attendance in the office as business needs required. Staff continued to embed new processes and procedures to ensure that the service and performance standards were maintained in a challenging climate.
4. For 2021/22 AccessNI set a target of issuing 63% of certificates digitally, an increase of 3% on the previous year. This target was not achieved as 57.5% of certificates were delivered digitally. [\[Section 2\]](#)
5. AccessNI met all of the time-bounded targets set by the Minister of Justice for the issue of certificates, including those applications referred to police forces. [\[Section 3\]](#)
6. AccessNI certificates provide a significant level of criminal record and other information on applicants thereby contributing to the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults in Northern Ireland. Two applications from individuals not permitted to work with children and/or vulnerable adults were detected, and appropriate action taken.

7. The Independent Reviewer scheme operated throughout 2021/22. This scheme enables applicants to ask for an independent review of spent criminal record information disclosed on a certificate or, where all the criminal record information to be disclosed relates to a time when the applicant was under 18 years of age, an automatic review to be undertaken. The scheme has worked smoothly with few delays and positive outcomes for the overwhelming majority of applicants. [\[Section 4\]](#)

8. Over 2021/22, AccessNI's operational costs increased slightly due primarily to:-

- Additional costs incurred in exiting the IT support arrangements provided through the NI Strategic Development Partnership contract.
- Increase in variable costs due to higher level of demand for checks.

9. Income increased compared to the previous year reflecting the higher number of disclosure applications received in AccessNI. This increased demand for checks led to an overall surplus in the year-end cost recovery position. [\[Section 5\]](#)

10. 60 organisations registered for the first time with AccessNI during 2021/22. At 31 March 2022 there were 650 statutory, private, voluntary and community groups with approved Registered Body status, and 137 organisations with Responsible Body status. 148 compliance audits were undertaken to ensure organisations were complying with the statutory based Code of Practice – these audits were all undertaken by way of video conference. As a result of these audits, a number of organisations were asked to provide additional information to assure AccessNI of their compliance with the Code and one was de-registered as a direct result of the audit. AccessNI was able to continue Registered Body training events using video conferencing, with 40 events provided, with a total of 1,137 attendees present. [\[Section 6\]](#)

11. AccessNI continued to work with the UK Central Authority for the exchange of criminal record information (ACRO) to obtain information on nationals from EU Member States. Greece, Czech Republic and Holland

were added to this list in April 2021, bringing the total number of EU countries that are engaged with AccessNI to 15. [\[Section 7\]](#)

12. AccessNI resolved 8 disputes raised by applicants where AccessNI had made an error [\[Section 8\]](#). The applicant survey showed that 92% of applicants who completed the survey rated the level of service of AccessNI as Very Good. 93% of applicants who completed the survey replied that they received their Disclosure Certificate in good time.

13. In addition to its performance activity, AccessNI successfully transferred the support, development and maintenance for the IT system to a new supplier, without any negative impact on services. AccessNI also upgraded the look and feel of the online application pages to ensure compliance with web accessibility regulations. [\[Section 9\]](#)

14. Looking to 2022/23, the key challenges will be to:-

- Meet Ministerial targets for the issue of checks;
- Contribute to a review the Filtering Scheme and List of Specified Offences;
- Consider and implement further enhancements to the AccessNI IT solution for staff and citizens;
- Introduce wider improvements to the AccessNI service, including:-
 - Training delivery
 - Registered Body Survey
 - Conducting Registered Body audits
- Develop a retention and disposal policy in relation to information on applicants and others held by AccessNI and update the AccessNI privacy statement;
- Improve AccessNI's ability to use management information;
- Monitor income and expenditure against AccessNI's cost recovery model;
- Review of processes with regards to aged debts; and
- Monitor compliance among registered organisations with the AccessNI Code of Practice.

Section 2 – Applications received and processed

Tables 1 and 2 show the number of applications received and processed by AccessNI in 2021/22 compared to the previous two years.

Table 1 – Applications received

Disclosure type	Apr 2019 - Mar 2020	Apr 2020- Mar 2021	Apr 2021- Mar 2022	% change 20/21 – 21/22
Basic (B)	32,613	30,730	42,902	+39.6%
Standard (S)	4,883	4,145	5,597	+35.0%
Enhanced (E)	115,068	84,105	116,701	+38.9%
Total	152,564	118,980	165,200	+38.8%

Table 2 – Applications processed

Disclosure type	Apr 2019 - Mar 2020	Apr 2020- Mar 2021	Apr 2021- Mar 2022	% change 20/21 – 21/22
Basic (B)	30,258	29,074	41,344	+45.6%
Standard (S)	4,531	3,965	5,581	+40.7%
Enhanced (E)	116,005	84,814	115,835	+36.6%
Total	150,794	117,853	162,760	+38.1%

Covid

To assist the on-going response to the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, AccessNI prioritised applications from the Education and Health sectors, along with those involved in the roll-out of vaccinations. Staff in AccessNI continued to work a hybrid approach, with rotas in place for office attendance to meet specific business needs.


Volunteer certificates

Where an applicant meets the statutory definition of a volunteer, no fee is payable for the certificate (Standard and Enhanced checks only). AccessNI noted that demand for volunteer checks reduced significantly in the first year of the pandemic (to 12.9% of all enhanced applications). 2021/22 has seen the level of volunteer checks return closer to the pre-pandemic position with 22.8% of all Enhanced checks being for volunteers. This figure is c.3% down on the average pre-pandemic position, but the overall trajectory appears to be moving in that direction.

Digital certificates

In July 2018, AccessNI introduced digital certificates for all types of disclosures where no criminal record or other information was included in that certificate, or where the applicant lives outside the UK. Digital certificates are delivered to the nidirect account used by the applicant when making their online application. The applicant can share the certificate by email with an employer, but these certificates are “invalid” if printed out. Digitally issued certificates allow applicants to receive their certificate more quickly and safely than the traditional postal method required for paper certificates. Paper certificates continue to be used for all certificates that disclose information.

Table 3 – Digital certificates

Target	Achievement	Met
63% of certificates issued digitally by 31 March 2022.	57.5% of certificates issued digitally over the year.	

In 2021/22, the target of 63% was not achieved – it may be the case that the preference for this type of certificate has plateaued at this point in time. AccessNI has set a target for 2022/23 of exceeding 60% of certificates delivered digitally by 31 March 2023. In order to improve uptake in this regard, AccessNI will deliver regular messages to Registered / Responsible Bodies impressing on them the advantages of digital certificates.

Police referrals

Approximately 25.5% of Enhanced applications were referred to PSNI during 2021/22. Referrals are made to PSNI where the applicant:-

- has been matched to a criminal record;
- has been matched to information on a police database;
- is undertaking work at their home; or
- lives or has lived in the Republic of Ireland within the last 5 years.

On referral of an application, PSNI determine if additional / non-conviction information should be disclosed on the applicant's AccessNI certificate using a statutory test defined within legislation. Referrals are made to police forces in Great Britain also.

Table 4 – Police Referrals for 2021/22

	PSNI	GB forces
Number of Enhanced applications referred	29,534	5,190
Number of disclosures made	279	8

Commentary

2021/22 saw a significant increase in the volume of disclosure applications submitted and processed by AccessNI, resulting in the busiest year ever in the Branch. Whilst the volume of Standard and Enhanced checks have broadly returned to the pre-pandemic levels of 2019/20 (up c2%), demand for Basic checks has increased significantly even against pre-pandemic figures (up 30%+ on 2019/20). AccessNI analysis is that the uplift in demand in 2021/22 (particularly the latter months of this period) is reflective of organisations adjusting their recruitment position as Covid-19 regulations are relaxed and activities and events are re-commenced. AccessNI will continue to monitor this position through 2022/23.

AccessNI's top 30 customers in 2021/22 requested 70,523 applications (60.3% of all applications made). The top 5 customers are set out below (along with their comparative demand for 2020/21):-

Table 5 – Top 5 Registered Bodies

Organisation	Applications (2021/22)	Applications (2020/21)
Education Authority	11,988	8,054
BSO Recruitment	5,918	5,460
Ulster GAA	5,479	1,943
Sterling Ltd	4,188	3,218
Security Industry Authority	3,947	2,794

Section 3 – Customer service standards

AccessNI service standards, set by the Minister of Justice, are to issue:

- 99% of Basic checks made via Responsible Bodies within 7 days
- 95% of Basic checks submitted directly by a member of the public within 14 days
- 99% of Standard checks within 7 days
- 70% of Enhanced checks within 10 days;
- 95% of Enhanced checks within 21 days; and
- 98% of Enhanced within 28 days

Table 6 – Service Standard Results (April 2021 - March 2022)

Type	Target	Achievement	Met
Basic check submitted via body	99% within 7 days	100%	✓
Basic check submitted directly by public	95% within 14 days	99.5%	✓
Standard check	99% within 7 days	99.8%	✓
Enhanced check	70% within 10 days	93.2%	✓
	95% within 21days	98.6%	✓
	99% within 28 days	99.3%	✓

The table below shows the average number of days to issue each type of disclosure check, along with a comparison to previous years.

Table 7 - Average Issue Time (calendar days)

Type	Apr 2019- Mar 2020	Apr 2020 - Mar 2021	Apr 2021- Mar 2022
Basic check via RB	0.9	0.5	0.8
Basic check by citizen	2.3	2.1	2.0
Standard check	1.0	0.7	0.8
Enhanced check	7.0	2.8	3.6

Commentary

AccessNI, with the assistance of PSNI, was able to meet all the challenging Ministerial targets for the return of certificates after receipt of applications in 2021/22. The average time to issue a certificate has remained relatively consistent over the past 3 years in respect of Basic and Standard certificates, with only a slight noted increase in the number of days for an Enhanced check (although still significantly less than the pre-pandemic position).

The following graphs below provide further information about the processing of applications throughout the year.

Figure 1 – Average certificate issue time (days) 2021/22

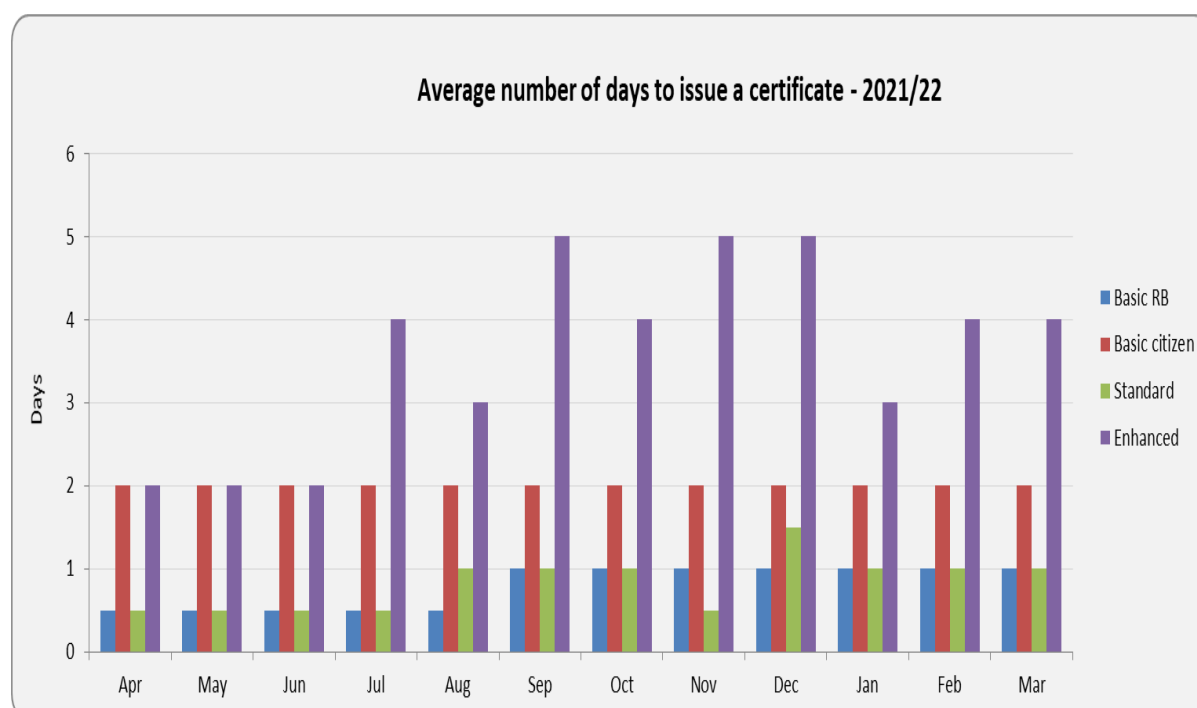


Figure 2 - Issue of Basic certificates 2021/22

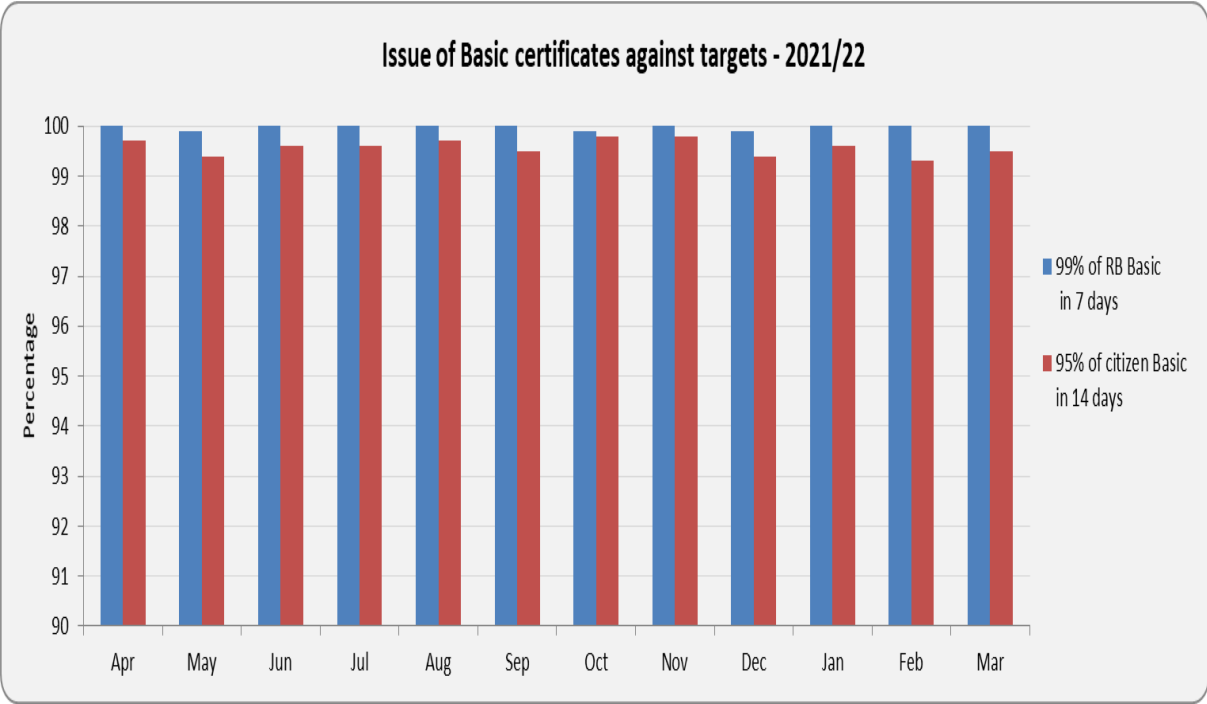


Figure 3 - Issue of standard certificates 2021/22

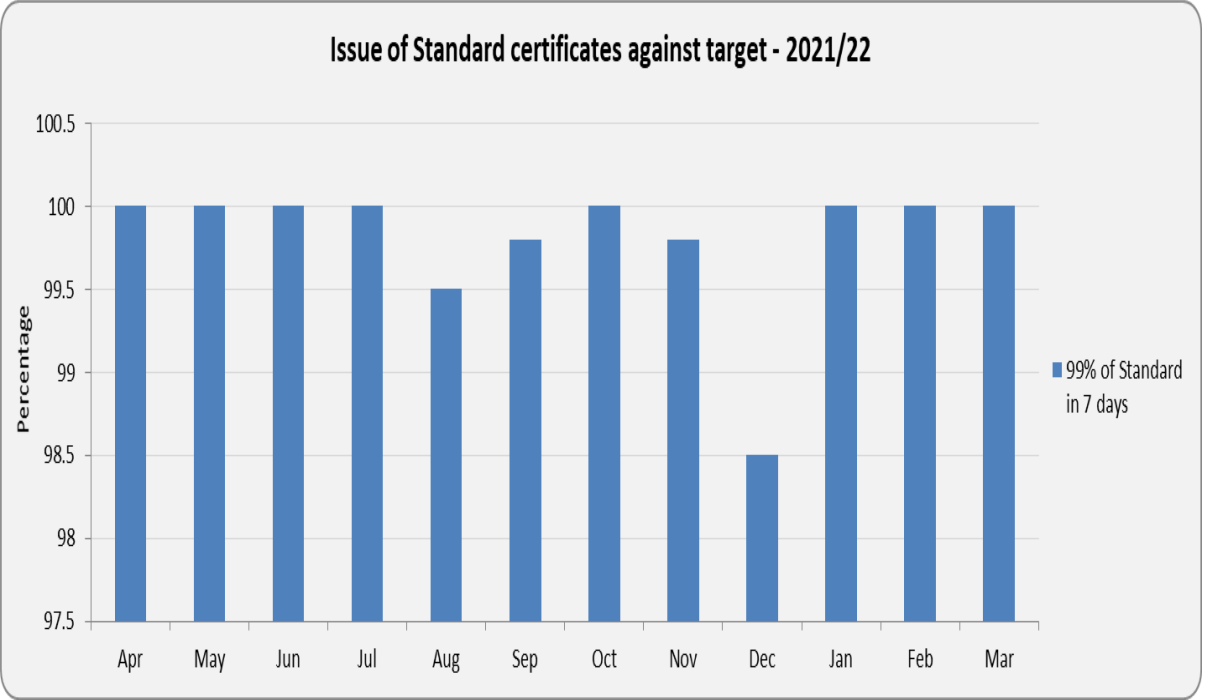
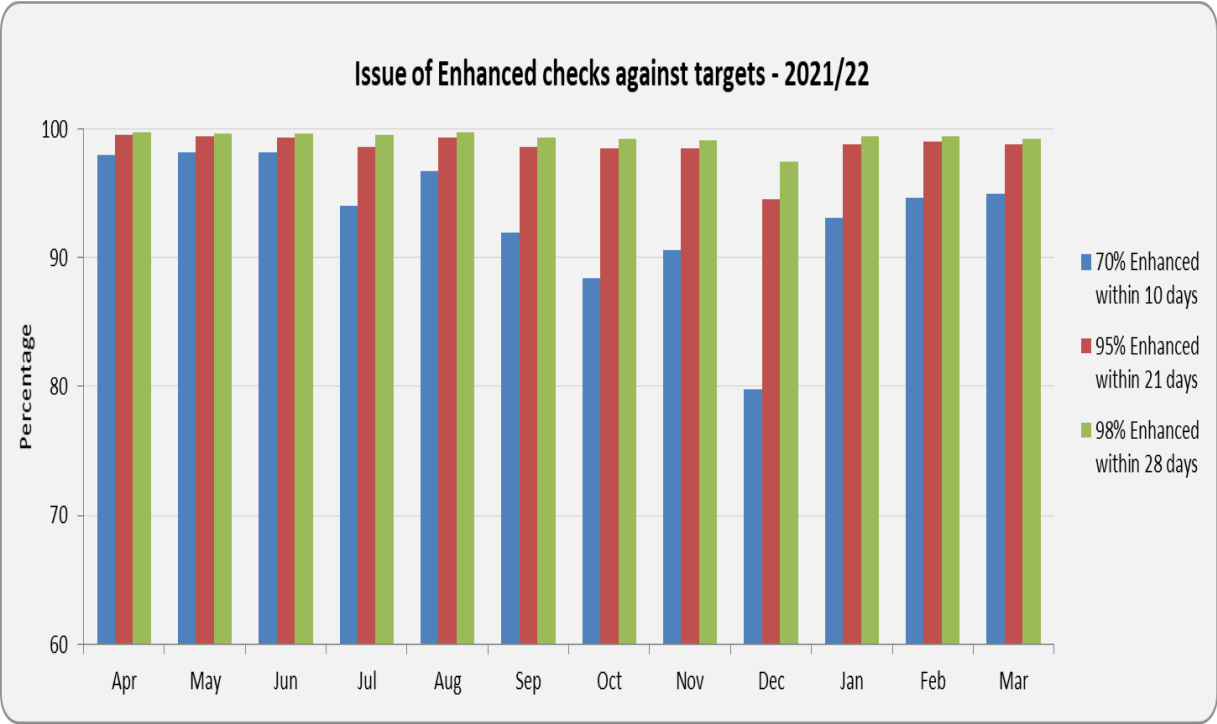


Figure 4 – Issue of Enhanced certificates 2021/22



Section 4 – Information disclosed on certificates

The table below sets out the total number of certificates processed in 2021/22, along with the number on which information was disclosed from various sources searched.

Table 8 – Disclosures of information on certificates

Type	Certs processed	PNC	PSNI	GB forces	UK lists
Basic	42,345	1,124 2.7%	N/a	N/a	N/a
Standard	5,581	736 13.2%	N/a	N/a	N/a
Enhanced	115,850	5,522 4.8%	279 ¹	8 ¹	2

Glossary of Terms

PNC	Police National Computer – UK criminal records information disclosed
PSNI	Non-conviction information released by PSNI and provided on enhanced checks
GB forces	Non-conviction information released by GB police forces and provided on enhanced checks.
UK lists	Matches against lists held by Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) & Scottish Government lists of those barred from working with vulnerable groups.

¹ Police information may have been included in certificates that also have criminal record information disclosed, that is in the PNC column.

Filtering

AccessNI filters old and minor convictions from Standard and Enhanced certificates, before they are issued, in line with legislation. The following table sets out the impact filtering had on disclosure certificates.

Table 9 – Impact of filtering

Type	Certs with information filtered	Certs with convictions filtered	Certs with cautions filtered	Certs with both filtered
Standard	630	475	130	25
Enhanced	4,587	2,801	1,601	185
Total	5,217	3,276	1,731	210

In June 2021, legislation was passed in the NI Assembly to amend the Filtering Scheme, effectively dropping the automatic multiple convictions rule. AccessNI had been applying this approach on an administrative basis since March 2020, meaning that all convictions will be considered for filtering after a period of 11 years has elapsed since the date of conviction, unless:-

- The offence was a serious or “specified” offence; or
- The offence resulted in a period of imprisonment.

Pending relevant legislative changes, AccessNI continues to refer all Standard and Enhanced cases containing non-court disposals awarded when the applicant was under 18 years of age, to the Independent Reviewer of Criminal Record Certificates for a decision on whether to retain the information, or remove it, before the certificate is issued.

During 2021/22 information was filtered from approximately 60% of Standard and Enhanced applications. However, AccessNI consider this has not impacted the safeguarding of vulnerable groups as serious offences, including those with a sentence of imprisonment, are always disclosed.

Independent Reviewer of Criminal Record Certificates

The criminal record review scheme enables an Independent Reviewer to examine cases where:-

- Prior to issue, all the information on a certificate relates to a time when the individual was under 18 (Auto-referral); and
- After the issue of a certificate, where an individual requests a review on the basis that it was disproportionate for that information to have been released (Review request).

The table below sets out the extent and outcome of the Independent Reviewer's work in 2021/22.

Table 10 – Work of Independent Reviewer – 2021/22

Type	Referred/ Received	Information removed	Information retained
Auto-referral	516	494	22
Review request	132	127	5
Total	648	621	27

Commentary

Table 8 highlights that the percentage of Basic certificates containing information was low (2.7%) as only unspent convictions and no non-court disposals are disclosed on such certificates. There was a significant percentage of certificates where information was found (in excess of 15%), but not disclosed due to the application of the Rehabilitation of Offenders (NI) Order 1978.

For Standard certificates, over 1 in 4 applicants were matched to information held on PNC. However, not all of the information was disclosed (for example impending prosecutions). After the application of the filtering process and where the Independent Reviewer removed information, the percentage of certificates where criminal record information was disclosed was 13.2%.

Of the applications made for Enhanced certificates 9% were matched to information held on PNC or had police information disclosed. As with Standard checks, and due to filtering, not all the information was disclosed - therefore, the number of checks where information was disclosed reduced to 5,811 (5%). Of these checks, 289 (2.5%) contained information from police or a notification that an applicant was on the barred list.

Two persons who applied for an Enhanced check were found to be on one of the UK lists of those barred from working with children or vulnerable adults. In October 2021 an applicant received a conviction for an offence of Making False Statement to obtain a Certificate. At 31 March 2022, two persons were under police investigation in relation to offences with regard to AccessNI applications.

Table 10 shows that the majority (96%) of information considered by the Independent Reviewer was removed from Standard / Enhanced certificates after that review, and before the certificate was issued.

Section 5 – Income and expenditure

AccessNI operates a full cost recovery model requiring the income derived from the receipts generated from disclosure applications to offset AccessNI expenditure each year. The table below sets out the difference between income from fees charged and expenditure on staff and non-staff costs together with notional costs in 2021/22 and compares this with the previous 2 years.

Table 11 – AccessNI cost recovery position

	Apr 2019- Mar 2020 (£000s)	Apr 2020- Mar 2021 (£000s)	Apr 2021- Mar 2022 (£000s)	% change for 21/22 against 20/21
Expenditure ²	3,019	3,026	3,130	+3.4%
Income	3,481	3,049	3,831	+25.6%
CR Out-turn	462	23	701	

Commentary

In 2021/22, AccessNI's costs increased by 3.4% due primarily to additional costs incurred in exiting the previous IT support contract, along with higher variable costs directly linked to the uplift in volume of disclosure applications.

In the same period, AccessNI's income increased by 25.6%, due to the significant increase in the volume of applications received in the year, including the surge in Basic checks (for which a fee must always be paid). As a result, AccessNI's cost recovery surplus in 2021/22 was £701k.

² Expenditure costs include costs of Depreciation and Notional running costs

Section 6 – Compliance work with organisations

AccessNI has a network of Registered Bodies that countersign applications for Standard and Enhanced certificates in accordance with Part V of the Police Act 1997 and a number of Responsible Bodies that countersign applications for Basic certificates on the basis of a Service Level Agreement with AccessNI. At 31 March 2021, 787 organisations in Northern Ireland, and wider afield, were registered with AccessNI.

All organisations are bound by a statutory Code of Practice that sets out their obligations as part of registration with AccessNI. AccessNI has a number of measures in place to ensure compliance with the Code including audits with organisations to test their level of compliance. The table below sets out information about AccessNI's compliance work.

Table 12 – Compliance visits

	Audit 21/22	De- Registrations	Audits 20/21	De- Registrations
Registered Body	148	0	128	0

Commentary

During 2021/22, compliance audits continued to be undertaken virtually, however, due to staffing pressures within the team, it was not possible to maintain audits at the target level of 20 per month. New staff have recently joined the team and it is expected that the number of audits will increase upon completion of training. It is anticipated that some level of physical visits can be re-established in due course, but virtual visits have proved successful and popular. This will allow for organisations to opt for the methodology that suits them best going forward.

AccessNI runs a monthly training programme for signatories to assist them in:-

- processing applications
- using the AccessNI online services

- complying with the Code of Practice
- understanding criminality information and interpreting disclosure certificates.

These sessions prove useful for both existing signatories that wish to refresh their knowledge of AccessNI issues and for new signatories. Throughout 2021/22, training sessions were all conducted virtually, with a total of 40 events successfully held, attended by approximately 1,137 persons. Feedback from these events remains positive with attendees generally appreciative of the guidance messages and support provided.

AccessNI continues to publish seasonal Newsletters. These are issued electronically to all approved signatories and provide a range of information and advice on eligibility for, and use of, AccessNI disclosure services.

Section 7 – EU referrals

During 2021/22, AccessNI continued its project with the UK's central authority for the exchange of criminal records (ACRO), to obtain information from approved EU Member States where Enhanced checks were sought for EU nationals that involved working with children in Northern Ireland. The project continued after Brexit, following an agreement between the UK Government and the EU to replace the EU directive under which the information could be obtained prior to Brexit.

In April 2021 three new countries (Czech Republic, Greece and Holland) were included within this project, bringing the overall list of EU countries to which AccessNI can issue referrals to 15. Details of the volume of referrals during 2021/22 are provided in the table below.

Table 13 - EU referrals in 2021/22

Country	Referrals	Country	Referrals	Country	Referrals
Bulgaria	46	Holland	36	Poland	476
Cz Republic	40	Hungary	54	Portugal	159
France	52	Italy	64	Romania	185
Greece	43	Latvia	66	Slovakia	57
Germany	100	Lithuania	183	Spain	101

A total of 1,662 referrals were made to these EU Member States in 2021/22. From these referrals a total of 19 matches were made to criminal records held in the EU Member States and 10 disclosures were made on Enhanced certificates.

Section 8 - Disputes

AccessNI deals with substantive disputes where the applicant questions the conviction or other information provided on the certificate. The figures below refer solely to occasions where AccessNI staff make an error, for example, selecting a criminal record that does not belong to the applicant. It does not include those instances where the criminal record is inaccurate.


The table below sets out the number of disputes upheld compared to the previous year.

Table 14 – Disputes upheld in 2021/22

	Total Upheld 2020/21	Total Upheld 2021/22
Substantive	4	8

Table 16 sets out achievement against the target for the number of substantive disputes upheld:-

Table 15 – Achievement for substantive disputes

	Target	Achieved	Met
Substantive	No less than 1 certificate in every 11,000 certificates issued to have an error	1 certificate in every 20,472 certificates contained an error	

Section 9 – AccessNI IT

During 2021/22, AccessNI has made a number of important changes to its IT system. Since 2015, support for the IT system had been provided through the NI Civil Service's shared service contract. This contract ends in October 2022 and AccessNI made a number of changes in preparation for this.

In April 2021, a specification for the support, maintenance and development of the IT system was released to tender resulting in a new supplier being appointed in June 2021.

AccessNI also introduced a number of changes in August 2021 to the customer portal to ensure it remained compliant with web accessibility regulations.

Finally, a number of issues with the IT system were resolved including the upgrading of the system to enable AccessNI staff to automatically filter old and minor convictions from certificates.