

NISRA Annual Business Plan 2024 / 2025



Statistics, analysis, research & registration services
to drive decision making for the public good.

Chief Executive's Foreword

As Chief Executive for the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and the Registrar General for Northern Ireland, it gives me great pleasure to introduce NISRA's Business Plan for 2024/25. This is the first such publication under NISRA's new Corporate Plan – *Statistics, Analysis, Research & Registration Services to drive decision making for the Public Good* – which sets out our ambition for the Agency over the next five years.

Background

The backdrop to this Business Plan and NISRA's new Corporate Plan provides a strong platform on which to develop. During 2023/24, our Census programme continued to drive value from the hugely successful Census 2021 data collection: delivering new insights and enabling users to mobilise a greater fraction of the data that were collected than ever before. Our economic, health and education statistics tracked our economy and the delivery of key public services, and new and improved methods and statistics were introduced in a wide range of different fields – from population statistics, to trade statistics and beyond.

With the return of the Executive at Stormont – and more recently the publication of a draft Programme for Government – NISRA statistics in a wide range of different areas are helping to inform democratic debate and discussion in Northern Ireland. Our research and policy insights – produced in 24 government departments and other public sector bodies – are helping to drive policy discussions and inform the public of the scale of the challenge facing government here.

In the General Register Office (GRO) and across the Registration network, our teams continued to provide a rapid, effective service to the public. More than 110,000 vital life events certificates were requested during 2023/24, and more than 98% of these were fulfilled within the target timescales.

That this performance was delivered against one of the tightest budget settlements in the Agency's history – and during a year in which we consulted users on scaling

back our outputs and activities – owes much to the professionalism, dedication and hard work of our staff, to whom I am hugely grateful.

Our strategic direction

Our new Corporate Plan – Statistics, Analysis, Research & Registration Services to drive decision making for the Public Good – seeks to build on this strong performance.

It responds to the new and rapidly changing analytical landscape in government and beyond. It recognises the continuing importance of official statistics as a means of measuring progress, and as a support for democratic accountability. It highlights research and analytical advice from real time management systems as critical supports to policy development. It emphasises the importance of reliable, modern registration services, underpinned by up to date, efficient, and empathetic processes.

Meeting the growing demand for new, faster and more detailed data and analysis is a challenge for all leading statistical and registration services institutes. New sources of administrative data, combined with new digital tools and methods are driving a revolution in best statistical and registration practices. Our new Corporate Plan demonstrates our willingness to continuously interpret our mandate in this changing context and to learn from international experience to meet the evolving needs of our users.

It emphasises the growing importance of linked data assets and cross-cutting analysis to provide joined up advice to support joined up policy. It reflects the need for rapid insights to support decision makers in Northern Ireland. And it highlights the potential of new digital developments to strengthen our registration services and our understanding of our economy and society to help make a difference to the lives of people in Northern Ireland.

To achieve these ambitions, our Corporate Plan identifies the key strategic enablers which we need to develop to deliver over the next five years. These include developing new approaches to using and linking the data we hold and access; how we disseminate our work and building a digital infrastructure which can meet our

needs over the longer term. It reflects the importance of our regulatory and legislative obligations, and it demonstrates our commitment to delivering in partnership with a wide range of other organisations. Above all, it recognises that our People are our greatest asset and are fundamental to our capacity to deliver.

Our plan for 2024/25

Over the remainder of 2024/25, NISRA will take the first steps towards the delivery of this new vision. Following the agreement of our Corporate Plan, this Business Plan sets out how we will start this work in the remainder of the year. In this and future years, we will meter our ambitions according to our budget position and our capacity to deliver, reporting transparently against our objectives in our Annual Report and Accounts.

Among the key objectives we will pursue are workstreams which will refine our vision, which will strengthen our operational footing, and which will actively move us towards our ambitions despite ongoing financial pressures.

We will continue to work to transform the Labour Force Survey into an online-first, low-cost and high quality Labour Market Survey which provides a proof of concept for a new Survey Transformation Strategy. We will set out a vision for integrating administrative and survey data in the NICS context – identifying strategic opportunities to improve response rates, data quality and analytical insights while limiting respondent burden. We will also continue to work to strengthen data sharing across the NICS and beyond, while respecting and preserving confidentiality.

To ensure our people have the tools they need to achieve our vision, we will start work on a ‘proof of concept’ version of a common analytical platform and toolkit for analysts across the NICS. We will set ambitious plans which promote the automation of analytical processes – embedding the concept of Reproducible Analytical Pipelines in our outputs, methods and processing – over the next five years actively pursuing these projects as far as our budget permits. We will refresh our Administrative Data Research NI partnership through discussions on our strategic approach as we prepare to bid for new round of UKRI support beyond

2026, and we will develop a new NISRA Research Strategy to help to build a common toolkit for in-house research.

To make sure that our outputs reach their intended audience and can help to shape decision making in Northern Ireland, we will establish a new Dissemination Board which will shape and promote new forms of digital release and media. In 2024/25, the Board will deliver a light-touch refresh of the NISRA website and strengthen our focus on the impact of our releases. We will work to maintain trust in our outputs, while seeking new audiences for our publications.

To underpin all of these objectives, we will begin work to review our suite of People policies. Conducted over 2024/25 and 2025/26, we will review our recruitment processes, our Learning and Development offering and a wider range of other policies, in collaboration with colleagues working on the wider NICS People Strategy. In these areas we expect to work closely with Trade Union colleagues.

Finally, among the most high-profile objectives for 2024/25 will be our legislative work. This includes work towards new legislation to put our current, pandemic-era death and still-birth registration processes onto a permanent statutory footing. It will include progressing new powers and the practical arrangements for a new baby loss certificate scheme in Northern Ireland: recognising the grief and loss which too many families bear in silence at present.

This will be an important year for NISRA, and there is a great deal of work to be done to take the first steps towards our new Corporate vision. I look forward to reporting back on our progress at year end.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "PDWales". The letters are cursive and connected.

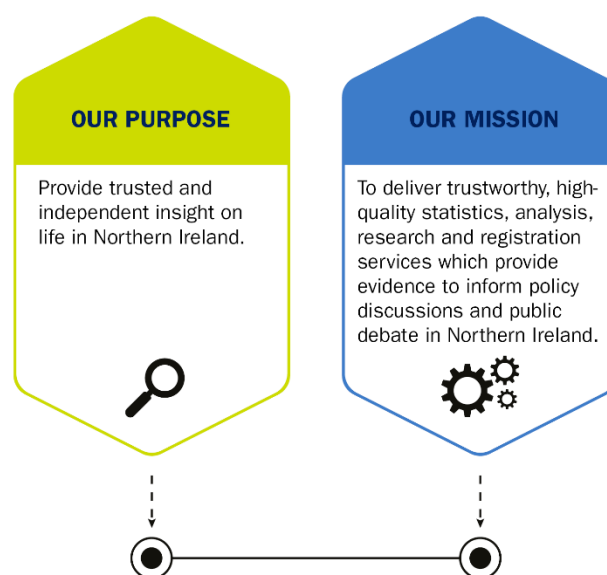
Philip Wales
Chief Executive & Registrar General

Our organisation and purpose

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), which incorporates the General Register Office (GRO), is an executive agency of the Department of Finance (NI). Our central purpose is to provide trusted and independent insights on life in Northern Ireland.

In delivering on this purpose, NISRA has become the principal source of statistics, analysis and research on the economy, population and society of Northern Ireland. Our outputs support decision makers in government, businesses, academia and among the general public by providing them with the best possible information on which to make important judgements. The statistics, analysis and research we produce enable us to monitor the progress we make towards the shared economic and social ambitions of the people of Northern Ireland.

In government, we produce a wide range of analytical outputs to support policy design, implementation and evaluation: helping to deliver better outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland. We independently monitor progress towards key objectives of the Programme for Government (PfG): supporting the effective operation of critical democratic accountability processes, free from political influence.



NISRA provides these services through a network of people embedded throughout the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) and the public sector more broadly. More than 400 staff work across 24 government departments, executive agencies and arm's length bodies.

The Agency is directed by the Chief Executive with support from the Senior Management Team and the Agency Board. Our governance arrangements are set out in the [NISRA Framework document](#).

We work with detailed and sometimes sensitive data within and across departments to identify and then answer key analytical challenges on topics ranging from the economy to the health service, from climate change to education. This increasingly involves important data linkage projects – combining information from different departments to support joined up policy making. We have a high-performing and professional field force numbering more than 200: helping to gather critically important intelligence on life in Northern Ireland.

A core part of NISRA, the GRO is responsible for the administration of marriage and civil partnership law in Northern Ireland, along with the registration of births, deaths, adoptions and gender recognition. GRO is also responsible for the maintenance of registration records and the production of certificates in relation to these events on request. GRO's activities provide an up to date account of life in Northern Ireland, through the recording of key life events.

Every 10 years NISRA conducts the Census of Population and Housing. The information collected provides detailed insights on our society, and is used widely inside and outside of government. It helps local government, health authorities and other organisations to plan and provide future services, and to allocate resources effectively. Following the release of key statistics from this programme, the data are now feeding into key population estimates and research to support policy making for the future.

The things we do



Trusted **official statistics** play a critical part in modern government. Best practice institutions monitor their key deliverables through independently produced, publicly released statistics.



NISRA's **research and analysis** uses cross-cutting datasets to deliver the key insights that policy-makers need: working across departments to deliver joined up thinking for joined up government.



The General Register Office provides key **registration services** to the general public: recording a wide range of life events through our network of Registrars. NISRA undertakes the **Census** in Northern Ireland every ten years.



Alongside our official statistics and our research outputs, NISRA statisticians provide **analytical insights** from management and real time information systems: giving key insights for decision makers.



NISRA **collects data** from households and businesses in Northern Ireland and increasingly creates **new linked datasets** which address cross-cutting challenges for use inside and outside of government.



Effective policy design learns from past experience. Working with teams across the NICS and the wider UK Government, NISRA supports **the design and evaluation of policy**: allowing realistic assessments of impact ahead of implementation, and evaluating outcomes afterwards.

OUR VISION

Our vision is to deliver the key statistical, analytical, research and registration services which are needed to improve the lives of the people of Northern Ireland. We want to collect, analyse and publish the key information which users need to make important decisions, to the benefit of the shared economic and social objectives of government in Northern Ireland and the broader public good. Implementing this vision will involve:

- Working to modernise our data collection and linkage services to produce the highest quality information possible on the economy, population and society of Northern Ireland: embedding modern, low-cost and high quality data collection processes which promote interoperability between datasets to maximise the potential for analytical insights from linked data.
- Being innovative and proactive in our engagement: identifying and meeting user needs for new data and analyses, while continuing to produce trusted, valued statistical outputs, and working to deliver outputs in increasingly accessible, impactful ways.
- Working across government and with academics to deliver high quality research outputs which address important questions in support of the Programme for Government.
- Continuing to deliver first class registration and genealogical services to our customers, using modern, efficient and secure technologies, consistent with legislation and in line with best practice.
- Developing and supporting our people so we can continue to foster an engaged, innovative, diverse workforce who are valued, supported and empowered to develop their careers in NISRA.

Through the delivery of excellent services and outputs, our vision will help NISRA continue to be a proud, confident, modern agency which is recognised for trusted and independent statistics, analysis, research and registration services.

HOW WE WILL DELIVER ON OUR VISION

To meet these aspirations, our Corporate Plan sets out how we need to change our operations over the 2024 to 2029 period. These changes draw on NISRA's recent experiences and on national and international best practice. They seek to learn from the proactive, positive responses of the statistical and registration systems to the Covid pandemic, the cost of living crisis and the UK's exit from the European Union.

More broadly, they reflect the way that modern statistics and registration services institutes aspire to work. They draw on our understanding of developments in the UK, Ireland and other international organisations and that of similar organisations in the NICS.

STRATEGIC ENABLERS

To deliver our vision for statistical, analytical, research and registration services in Northern Ireland, NISRA depends on a range of strategic enablers. These are central aspects of our operating context which govern our ability to deliver services for our users and stakeholders, and which – along with our financial position – determine our capacity for change.

As our most important asset, our diverse **People** are perhaps the key strategic enabler which help NISRA to deliver on our mandate and advance change. The Corporate Plan sets out our ambition to continue to invest in their advanced skillsets, to maintain and increase their engagement on important policy issues, so that they continue to feel proud to work in NISRA and of the public good which their activities facilitate. It signals our commitment to deliver an enabling **digital infrastructure** which empowers them to use their skills and capabilities efficiently and effectively.

The change we envisage will also require a renewed strategic approach to our **data**: how we collect data against a backdrop of falling response rates internationally; how we store, link and make available cross-cutting datasets which are interoperable by design. Our approach to **dissemination** will also play a key enabling role. We need to continue to address questions identified in dialogue with users and to publish our insights through increasingly accessible, impactful, user-focused methods.

NISRA’s capacity to deliver will also be shaped by our enabling **partnerships**. Working with analysts, operational services and domain experts across the NICS, the UK and international statistical systems will play a key role. In all this work, we need to ensure we have the right **statistical, legislative and public approval** to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

To deliver our vision and to become the agency that we need to be, progress will need to be made against all of these areas over the next five years. Working with partners across the NICS and more widely, we will monitor progress towards this vision in our annual business plans: setting out the measures that we need and will take as an Agency – finances permitting – on an annual basis.



Governance arrangements

The Chief Executive is the designated Agency Accounting Officer and is responsible to the Finance Minister and accountable to the NI Assembly for the Agency's use of resources. The Chief Executive is responsible for the propriety and regularity of the Agency's expenditure and for ensuring that the requirements of Government accounting standards and practice are met.

The Chief Executive ensures that the Agency observes any general guidance issued by DoF and puts into effect any recommendations by the Public Accounts Committee, other Assembly Select Committees or other relevant authority, which the Executive has accepted.

The Agency is subject to external audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland in concert with the Agency's own Audit and Risk Committee (ARC). ARC includes 2 non-executive directors (NEDs) one of whom also acts as Committee Chair. Both NEDs are also members of the DoF ARC, providing considerable continuity of approach and direct oversight of Agency level governance.

The Senior Management Team and Agency Board assist the Chief Executive in the strategic management of the Agency and provide advice on major issues of policy. The [NISRA Framework Document](#) sets out further information on the Corporate Governance arrangements.

Partners and ALBs

Nationally the Agency works in partnership with the UK Office for National Statistics, the Office for Statistics Regulation and the Government Statistical Service as well as collaboratively with the lead statisticians in the other regional administrations, and the Republic of Ireland

Locally the Agency works in partnership with every district council in the delivery of registration services through the Local Council Offices. NISRA considers the various NI business and industry sectors to be some of its most significant stakeholders, given the Agency's routine engagement with them in gathering economic data. Their views are represented specifically by the Department of Finance's (DoF) Arm's Length Body (ALB), the Statistical Advisory Committee (SAC) whose members are Ministerial appointees.

NISRA BUSINESS PLAN 2024/25

The Business Plan sets out our objectives for 2024/25, which are grouped either as the delivery of our core business or under the Strategic Enablers set out in NISRA’s Corporate Plan. The objectives which NISRA records in the Business Plan of our parent department – the Department of Finance – are nested within these objectives. Our objectives are largely formulated as our intended Outcomes for the next twelve months, which includes the Indicators and Performance Measures that we will take towards achieving those Outcomes.

DoF Target No.	Priority	Target	Measurement	Timescale
14	Priority 3: A Modernised and Innovative Service	Amend death and still-birth legislation to make the provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020 permanent.	Advance preparatory work on legislation to continue the remote registration of deaths and still-births and electronic exchange of related documentation on a permanent basis.	March 2025
20a	Priority 4: Excellent Public Services	Provide high quality statistical information to support public policy.	Maintain the percentage of the general public who state they trust statistics produced by NISRA.	March 2025
20b			Release remaining planned Census 2021 outputs and publish a general report.	March 2025
20c			Develop and pilot new online Labour Market Survey.	March 2025
21		Deliver key civil registration services – births, deaths, marriages, civil partnerships and adoptions.	98% of priority certificate applications and 98% of standard certificate applications, fulfilled within target timescales (1 working day – priority certificate applications / 5 working days for standard certificate applications).	March 2025

Strategic Objectives & Enablers	INDICATOR	PERFORMANCE MEASURE
1. Business Delivery	Deliver key civil registration services – births, deaths, marriages, civil partnerships and adoptions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 98% of priority certificate applications, and 98% of standard certificate applications fulfilled within target timescales
	Provide high quality statistical information to support public policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publish the statutory annual report of the Registrar General for 2023.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop an excess deaths methodology in conjunction with the rest of UK National Statistics Institutes.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce six new data linkages for research use by accredited researchers.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Release remaining planned Census 2021 outputs and publish a general report.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress data acquisition and research activities related to assessing the availability and suitability of utilising administrative data in the production of future census-type and population statistics in Northern Ireland.
	NISRA outputs are quality assured.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of official statistical outputs with process documentation.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of official statistical outputs with a documented quality assurance process.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of breaches of the Code of Practice for Statistics.
	Planning and Resource Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify our affordable approved¹ vacancies and fill 90% of these within six months of approval under normal recruitment and promotion conditions.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finalise the NISRA Corporate Plan, consulting with SMT, Agency Board and NISRA as a whole.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begin the consultation process for refreshing the NISRA Framework document.
	The Agency will remain within allocated budget.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Underspend to be as close to budget as possible.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and monitor our resource allocation within NISRA in the context of the wider financial challenges in NICS. 		

¹Refers to vacancies approved within NISRA and DoF FMB, includes temporary as well as permanent placements.

Strategic Objectives & Enablers	INDICATOR	PERFORMANCE MEASURE
2. Engaged Ambitious Skilled People	Learning and Development supports delivery of business objectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate partnerships with other DOF business areas to identify common training resources which can be made available to people working in NISRA.
	Staff are engaged.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of Wellbeing events organised.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct one (career development or professional development) managed moves exercise at DP Statistician and Assistant Statistician, per year and at other analytical grades prior to allocation from a merit list
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hold quarterly All Staff Updates including a mix of content from different branches and maintain visibility of senior management for NISRA staff
	HR Element	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carry out recruitment exercises for Assistant Statisticians, Deputy Principal Statisticians and other grades as required
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begin a review of NISRA's recruitment practices in concert with NICS HR, to ensure that processes are as effective as possible, to report in 2025/26
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begin a review of NISRA's internal human resources policies, to report in 2025/26
3. Legislative approval and authority	NISRA activities are legislatively compliant.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confirmed number of reported Breaches of DPA / GDPR.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subject Access Requests (SAR) processed on time (number / %).
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NISRA DoF FOI requests processed on time (number / %).
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confirmed number of Breaches of DEA.
	The public is aware of and trusts NISRA.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain the percentage of the general public who state they trust statistics produced by NISRA.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of awareness of NISRA amongst the general public.
Amend death and still-birth legislation to make the provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020 permanent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advance work on the legislation required to make permanent provision for the temporary Coronavirus Act 2020 powers related to the remote registration of deaths and still-births and the electronic exchange of related documentation 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advance work required to deliver a Baby Loss Certificate Scheme. 	

Strategic Objectives & Enablers	INDICATOR	PERFORMANCE MEASURE
4. Enabling digital Infrastructure	Standardisation of Data Analysis and analytical toolset.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree on a Digital Infrastructure Vision for NISRA, setting out a new central IT function and our future digital infrastructure model.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work areas within NISRA will start to devise and deliver implementation plans which roll out NISRA’s Reproducible Analytical Pipelines (RAP) Strategy for all key statistical processes and outputs (with the right systems, tools and support)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convene a NISRA RAP Working Group, made up of volunteers from those who have implemented RAP. This group will take the RAP strategy forward and support branches in the development of their RAP implementation plans.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver a structured Training and Development Pathway / Communication and Engagement Plan to ensure Managers and staff understand RAP, covering what it is and the benefits.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A ‘proof of concept’ NISRA toolkit will be developed to improve collaboration, strengthen contingency and reduce reliance on costly licensed software. To include a recommended suite of data collection, management, analysis and dissemination software tools that can be deployed throughout the Agency.
5. User-focused Dissemination	NISRA releases and publications are of high quality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of official statistics releases with corrections (including major corrections and minor errors).
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of official statistics publications.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of Accredited Official Statistics publications.
	Promote best practice in dissemination and maximise the positive impact of NISRA’s outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a Dissemination Strategy and establish a Dissemination Board to promote dissemination best practice and: • Conduct a light touch refresh of the NISRA website • Develop a Social media policy. • Develop pathways to upskill staff and build Agency wide capacity to deliver user-focused dissemination and data visualisation skills.

Strategic Objectives & Enablers	INDICATOR	PERFORMANCE MEASURE
6. Purposeful Partnerships	Engagement Models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare an engagement model for NISRA in concert with our stakeholders to include how we will engage with our wider NISRA family in departments/ ALBS and senior officials in NICS departments.
	ADR Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare a Refreshed ADR NI Strategy to improve the operation of our partnership and to lay the groundwork for a future bid for continued UKRI funding.
7. Strategic Data Assets	Data Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare a refreshed vision for the management of our strategic data assets to maximise the potential to leverage survey and administrative data for analysis.
	Survey Transformation Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree and start to deliver a plan to modernise our data collection services to produce the highest quality information possible on the economy, population and society of Northern Ireland
	Research Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a new Research Strategy and five year action plan, to bring together resources for researchers and start to develop a coordinated approach to inter-department research • Establish a NISRA Research Board to guide NISRA's research activities, and take forward the work of the Research Strategy

Financial Resources

NISRA's opening Resource Budget for the financial year (FY) 2024/25 is:

Opening budget	FY 2024/25	FY 2023/24
	£'m	£'m
Salaries	27.88	23.08
General Administrative Expenses	5.42	7.92
Total Operating Expenses	33.30	31.00
Income	(22.30)	(19.86)
Net Operating Cash Budget	11.00	11.14
Non-cash	2.14	2.14

In addition to the opening budget allocated above, the Agency has bid and successfully received additional resource budget of £0.75M for 2024/25 (Census Modernisation – £0.60M and Windsor Framework – £0.15M).

The opening indicative capital budget allocation is:

£'m	FY 2024/25	FY 2023/24
Capital	3.58	3.58

The budget includes:

- £1.60m for updating/development of Social Survey Operations and Infrastructure and delivery of PfG Indicator Data,
- £0.72m for the New Integrated Business Survey System (IBSS); and
- £0.17m for updates to the Northern Ireland Registration Office System (NIROS) and – Genealogy Northern Ireland System (GeNI) systems (GRO).