

- a. Witness Name: Sir David Sterling
- b. Statement No.:
- c. Exhibits:
- d. Dated:

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SIR DAVID STERLING

I, David Sterling, will say as follows: -

Personal History

2. I joined the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) in February 1978. I served in a variety of grades and roles from then until March 1996 in the Police Authority for Northern Ireland (PANI) and the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). I was promoted into the Senior Civil Service (SCS) in 1996 working in PANI, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), the Department of Regional Development (DRD) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) before being promoted to Permanent Secretary (Grade 2) in DETI in October 2009 where I served until 30 June 2014.
3. On 1 July 2014 I was transferred to the post of Permanent Secretary DFP, (now known as the Department of Finance (DoF)). I was appointed Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (HOCS) on 14 June 2017 following a competition held in autumn 2016. The appointment was initially on an interim basis following the collapse of the NI Executive in January 2017. The appointment was confirmed as substantive by the First and deputy First Ministers following the return of the Executive in 2020. I announced my intention to retire on 6 January 2019 and subsequently retired from the NICS on 31 August 2020.

My Role as Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the Permanent Secretary of the Executive Office between 2017 and 2020

4. As HOCS I fulfilled three broad functions as:

Programme, led to a lengthy period of “Political Talks” which culminated in the Stormont House Agreement of December 2014. This, however, did not deliver a durable settlement and further political talks were needed in 2015, leading to the “Fresh Start Agreement” published in November 2015.

21. Disagreement between the First Minister and deputy First Minister over a number of issues including the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scheme then led to the collapse of the Assembly and the Executive in January 2017. Extended, but unsuccessful, Political Talks took place throughout 2017 and into early 2018. These were resumed in May 2019 and led ultimately to the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) political deal of January 2020 and the resumption of the Assembly and the Executive on 11 January 2020.
22. This political disruption had two major effects on the NICS. Firstly, the political processes consumed a considerable amount of “bandwidth” for me, permanent secretaries and senior staff. Secondly, and perhaps more profoundly, the three-year period from 2017 to 2020 left the Northern Ireland Departments without the ministerial direction and control that is a prerequisite of our democratic constitution. It is a well-established convention that “officials advise and ministers decide”. The absence of this political direction left public services in a state of, what I described publicly at the time, “decay and stagnation” due to the absence of ministerial direction on matters of strategy, policy and the prioritisation of resource allocation. It is a matter of record that a Programme for Government (PfG) has not been agreed by an Executive since March 2012 (which ran for four years until 2016) and a multi-year Budget has not been agreed since 2011. I shall return to this issue later in my Statement.

Workforce Constraints

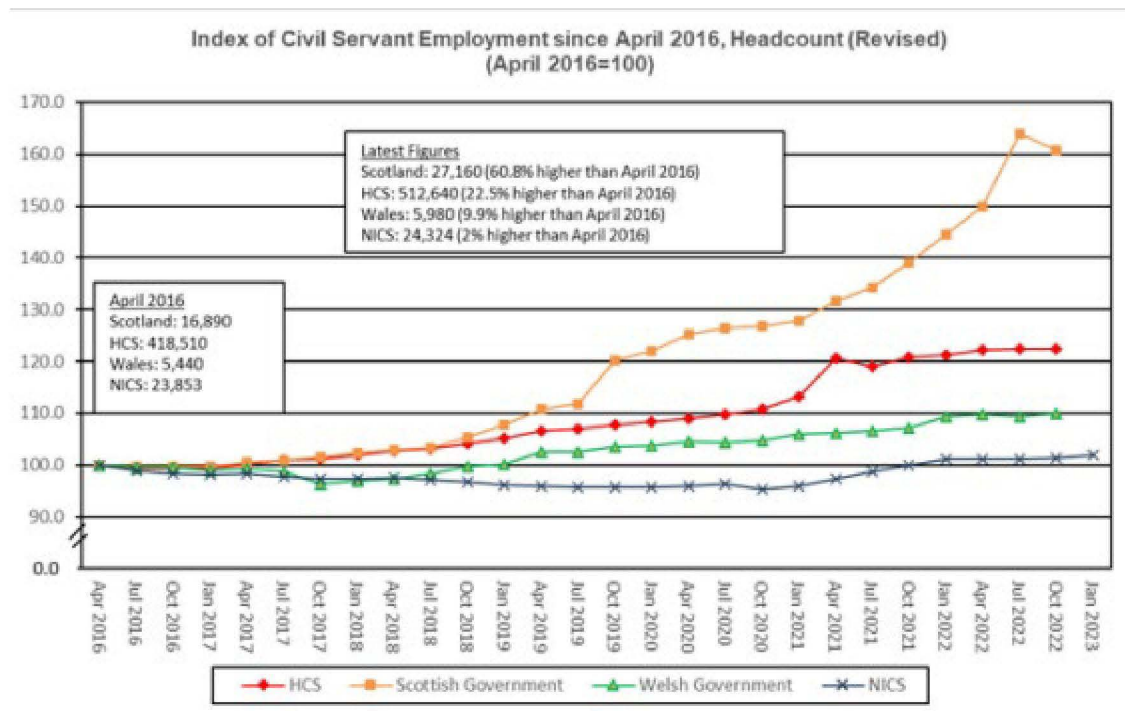
23. The Stormont House Agreement of 2014 committed the Executive to a comprehensive programme of reform and restructuring. This included measures to reduce pay bill costs and reduce the size of the NICS and the wider public sector in the face of significant budget constraints. The Stormont House Agreement and the implementation plan within the Fresh Start Agreement provided the flexibility to use capital borrowing to fund voluntary exit (VE) schemes over the four-year period to 2018-19. A combination of the VE scheme and an extended recruitment freeze saw

the NICS contract by around 18% during the period from 2014 to 2020.

Figure 2: All Industrial and Non-Industrial NICS Staff (FTE), 2013 to 2022



24. It is worth noting that this contraction was greater than in the civil service in GB and that numbers did not begin to increase until late 2020.



25. The NISRA chart shows that NICS staff numbers have been rising since October 2020 and are now 2% higher than in April 2016. However, by way of contrast, Scotland's staff numbers are currently 60.8% higher than in April 2016. For Great Britain as a whole, staff numbers have increased