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**Mark Pont, Assessment Programme Lead**

Siobhan Carey, CBE  
Chief Executive and Registrar General  
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency  
(by email)

27 January 2021

Dear Siobhan

I am writing to you following the recent review we concluded on the progress NISRA has made in addressing gaps in Northern Ireland's economic statistics. We carried out our review to take stock of what has been achieved over the last five or so years of progress.

Our review focused on a core principle of the Code of Practice for Statistics – ensuring statistics are relevant to users. We also considered progress made towards meeting some publicly expressed needs of users and other stakeholders for Northern Ireland economic data<sup>1</sup> in 2014. We were pleased to find that NISRA provided feedback to those who raised these needs and was transparent about how they could and could not be met. We have been impressed by the progress made by NISRA to fill data gaps since then and have shared the detailed findings of our review with your colleagues responsible for producing NISRA's economic statistics.

Against the backdrop of the significant 3+ years EU Exit project, NISRA has made many positive developments to expand its suite of economic statistics and enhance public understanding, including:

- Making considerable progress in developing National Accounts through the Economic Accounts Project (EAP) – resulting in the production of Input-Output (IOTs) and Supply-Use Tables (SUTs) for Northern Ireland. The EAP has also underpinned the development of econometric models supporting Northern Ireland's response to EU Exit and, more recently, to the Covid-19 pandemic. NISRA has engaged extensively with users throughout this project, including both government and non-government stakeholders in annual Expert User Group meetings. We commend this engagement.
- The development of NISRA's GDP proxy – the Northern Ireland Composite Economic Index (NICEI). NISRA's efforts to enhance user understanding of the NICEI are particularly commendable.
- Producing Broad Economy Sales and Export Sales (BESES) statistics and a regularly updated Economic Dashboard which makes high-quality economic statistics accessible for users. BESES data has been vital in supporting the planning

for the UK's exit from the European Union by for example HM Treasury, HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), the Department for Economy and others to date.

- Continuing with ongoing efforts to improve its data-sharing capabilities, with a focus on making statistics available for use in research and evaluation. We are pleased to hear about NISRA's plans, which will help to ensure that maximum value is extracted from its economic data.

We expect that NISRA may identify additional user needs going forward and we will be interested in the mechanisms through which NISRA becomes aware of these. During our review we identified two such needs which NISRA may wish to look into:

- The extent to which data gaps impede distributional analysis required to perform business case and impact evaluations.
- User needs for wealth and assets data.

We are pleased to see NISRA's commitment to ask OSR to assess the BESES statistics, the NICEI and the SUTs over the next few years, with a view to National Statistics designation once full compliance with the Code of Practice for Statistics has been confirmed. Our findings from this review should help your colleagues prepare for our assessments of some of your key economic statistics over the next few years. These include:

- The extent to which the data needs of a broad range of economic statistics users are being met including third sector and private sector users. This includes understanding where data needs are not currently being fulfilled, for example the continued provision of retail sales analysis for Northern Ireland.
- The extent to which users are aware of, and engaged in, NISRA's development plans for its economic statistics.
- Investigating ways of improving the familiarity of users in manipulating these statistics to enhance public value. These analytical tables have the potential to inform economic analysis, appraisals and evaluations, once users are confident and familiar with their use.
- We look forward to seeing how NISRA builds on its existing collaborations going forward with for example HMRC and HM Treasury to enhance the value of economic statistics.
- The timeliness of economic statistics, including the SUTs. The ability of economic statistics to be useful is often related to their timeliness.

We would like to thank the NISRA team for its proactive cooperation throughout the review process. Our Economy team will continue to engage with the team going forward to help prepare for the assessment of the statistics we have referred to above. I am copying this to Brian Green, Director of Sources, and Chris Ganley, lead for the Economic Accounts and EU Exit work streams, both at NISRA.



Mark Pont

Assessment Programme Lead