



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

Report on Road Openings by Utilities

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Report: NIA 153/22-27 Public Accounts Committee



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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Powers and Membership

Powers

The Public Accounts Committee is a Standing Committee established in accordance with Standing Orders under Section 60(3) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is the statutory function of the Public Accounts Committee to consider the accounts, and reports on accounts laid before the Assembly.

The Public Accounts Committee is appointed under Assembly Standing Order No. 56 of the Standing Orders for the Northern Ireland Assembly. It has the power to send for persons, papers and records and to report from time to time. Neither the Chairperson nor Deputy Chairperson of the Committee shall be a member of the same political party as the Minister of Finance or of any junior minister appointed to the Department of Finance.

Membership

The Committee has 9 members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA (Chairperson)
- Mr Tom Buchanan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)^{4, 7}
- Mr Cathal Boylan MLA
- Mr Jon Burrows MLA^{1,2,3,6}
- Ms Jemma Dolan MLA⁹
- Mr Stephen Dunne MLA⁵
- Mr Colm Gildernew MLA
- Mr David Honeyford MLA
- Mr Gareth Wilson MLA^{7, 8}

¹With effect from 5 March 2024 Mr John Stewart replaced Mr Robbie Butler

²With effect from 21 October 2024 Mr Colin Crawford replaced Mr John Stewart

³With effect from 31 July 2025 Mr Colin Crawford resigned

⁴With effect from 16 September 2025 Ms Diane Forsythe replaced Ms Cheryl Brownlee as Deputy Chairperson

⁵With effect from 23 September 2025 Mr Stephen Dunne replaced Ms Cheryl Brownlee

⁶With effect from 6 October 2025 Mr Jon Burrows replaced Mr Colin Crawford

⁷With effect from 24 February 2026 Mr Tom Buchanan replaced Ms Diane Forsythe as Deputy Chairperson

⁸With effect from 2 March 2026 Mr Gareth Wilson replaced Ms Diane Forsythe

⁹With effect from 2 March 2026 Ms Jemma Dolan replaced Mr Pádraig Delargy

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report

AI	Artificial Intelligence
C&AG	Comptroller and Auditor General
GB	Great Britain
HAUC	Highway Authorities and Utilities Committee
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators
NI	Northern Ireland
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
The Assembly	The Northern Ireland Assembly
The Committee	Public Accounts Committee
The Department	Department for Infrastructure
UK	United Kingdom

Executive Summary

Introduction

1. The Public Accounts Committee met on 11 December 2025 to consider the Northern Ireland Audit Office's (NIAO) report "Road Openings by Utilities". The main witnesses were:

11 December 2025, Department for Infrastructure

- **Dr. Denis McMahon**, Permanent Secretary, Department for Infrastructure
- **Colin Woods**, Deputy Secretary Transport and Road Asset Management, Department for Infrastructure
- **Colin Sykes**, Director of Road Asset Management, Department for Infrastructure
- **Dorinnia Carville**, C&AG, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and
- **Stuart Stevenson**, Treasury Officer of Accounts, Department of Finance.

The Committee also requested subsequent written clarification from the Department for Infrastructure on a number of matters raised during its initial oral evidence session.

Background

2. Utilities are companies that supply essential services to consumers, such as gas, electricity, and communications. In order to deliver services Utilities must regularly maintain and upgrade their infrastructure. Often these upgrades require Utilities to open roads and pavements and then reinstate the road or pavement for use by the public. It is the responsibility of Utilities to ensure that these reinstatements are of adequate quality. The Department for Infrastructure is responsible for overseeing the performance of Utilities.

The publicly funded cost of road maintenance linked to defective Utility reinstatements need to be understood

3. Even when reinstated to a satisfactory standard, any road opening weakens the structure of the road or pavement. A large number of openings and reinstatements contributes to accelerated deterioration of the network, imposing subsequent maintenance costs on the Department for Infrastructure. With over 50,000 openings by Utilities each year there is a significant financial risk posed should the general quality of Utility reinstatements be poor.
4. Openings are not the only cause of deterioration in road and pavement quality. They are only one of a number of causes of defects that the Department is required to repair across the entire network. The Committee understands that in recent years the Department has not been able to undertake all the maintenance work that its processes have identified. As a result, the road network is in a wholly unacceptable state of general disrepair. The NIAO report highlighted at the time of its publication that there was a known backlog of over £3.3 billion of maintenance work outstanding.
5. The Committee is deeply concerned the Department has no reliable way of calculating how much of that burden arises from deterioration linked specifically to Utility reinstatements. Without this understanding, the Department cannot provide the Committee with any meaningful assurance that taxpayers are not subsidising repairs that should properly be funded by Utilities.

Greater clarity is needed on the benefits of new digital mapping

6. The Committee welcomes the ambition shown in the Department's digital mapping and AI project, which could transform the way road condition is understood and defects are identified. The creation of a "digital twin" of the entire road network represents an important and forward-looking step.
7. However, this is a high-risk, early-stage project, and significant uncertainty remains about the accuracy of the AI analysis and the Department's readiness to integrate the data into its operational planning. The Committee strongly supports innovation, but it is clear that the benefits will take several years to

materialise. In the meantime, clearer milestones, greater transparency, and a detailed plan for how the data will be used are essential.

Warranty periods applied to Utility reinstatements need reviewed immediately

8. Warranties are a key mechanism intended to protect the taxpayer from short-term costs arising from poor-quality reinstatements. However, the Committee is concerned that the current two or three-year warranty period for Utility reinstatements does not provide taxpayers with adequate protection. Evidence from other jurisdictions, including a recent increase in Scotland to a six year warranty period, demonstrates that longer periods may be warranted.
9. The Department accepts that a review is needed but has not yet begun preparatory work. Given the financial risks involved, the Committee believes that this review should begin immediately, ensuring that decisions can be taken promptly once new data from the digital mapping project becomes available.

Urgent action is required to restore a robust inspection programme

10. Effective inspections are central to ensuring that reinstatement works are completed to the required standard and that defects are identified early. The Department's inspection programme is not delivering the level of assurance that the public and the Committee expect. Seven consecutive years of missed visual inspection targets, combined with the suspension of the core testing programme due to resourcing shortages, represent a serious risk.
11. Core testing is crucial because it identifies defects beneath the surface, with these being the defects most likely to lead to costly future failures. The divergence between visual and core failure rates is still unexplained, and the Committee remains unconvinced that the current inspection regime provides reliable assurance.
12. Urgent action is required to restore a credible inspection programme, including the reinstatement of core testing and the introduction of risk-based sampling.

The public's experience of road openings must be understood and addressed

13. The Committee believes that disruption caused by Utility works continues to have a significant impact on road users and local communities. Inconsistent contractor behaviour, poor communication, and unclear lines of responsibility all contribute to disruption and uncertainty for residents and businesses.
14. While the Department provides reporting channels, these systems do not generate the thematic insights needed to understand recurring problems or drive improvements. The Committee believes that the Department must substantially strengthen how it gathers, analyses, and responds to public concerns, and ensure that reporting mechanisms are simple, accessible, and well-promoted.

Greater transparency will help improve performance

15. The Department collects a wide range of performance data from Utilities but publishes only a small portion of it. More transparent and disaggregated reporting would help drive improvements, shine a light on poor performers, and give the public greater confidence that issues are being addressed.
16. The Committee notes that meaningful benchmarking with other UK administrations is still limited, but welcomes work with the Highways Authority and Utilities Committee (UK) to improve comparability. Benchmarking will be a vital tool in encouraging better performance across the sector.

Co-ordinated workforce development is needed

17. The Department's ability to manage road openings by Utilities has been constrained by significant recruitment and retention challenges, particularly in professional and technical roles.
18. The Committee recognises the Department's efforts to innovate in workforce development, including new pathways and the Assured Skills Programme. However, these challenges are system-wide and require coordinated,

cross-departmental action to ensure that the Department can access the skills it needs across all regions of Northern Ireland.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that within 6 months of the publication of this report the Department develops a methodology to determine the cost of maintenance linked specifically to Utility reinstatements. The Department should use this information to determine if its cost recovery approach is appropriate and whether it is achieving value for money.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that within 12 months of the completion of the current mapping exercise (due 31 March 2026) the Department publishes a detailed action plan setting out how the data gathered will be used to support decision-making and action, including clear milestones, KPIs, and commitments on data transparency.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that within 6 months of the publication of this report the Department undertakes a review of current warranty periods in order to determine that they remain appropriate and provide value for money for taxpayers.

This review should incorporate an analysis of any methods that can be adopted by learning from neighbouring jurisdictions in relation to ensuring sufficient quality of reinstatements.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the Department modernise and strengthen its inspection programme as a matter of urgency. This should include:

- (i) the immediate restoration of a statistically robust core testing regime;
- (ii) the urgent analysis of diverging visual and core failure trends; and

- (iii) the introduction of risk-based sampling to ensure that inspection resources are targeted effectively.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that within 12 months of the publication of this report the Department establish a system capable of identifying, monitoring and reporting thematic trends in respect of public concerns about road openings, including issues related to Utilities and their contractors. The Department should ensure it uses this information to improve the public's experience and contractor performance.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that within 12 months of the publication of this report the Department reviews and, where appropriate, adopts lessons from other jurisdictions on managing and minimising disruption to the public in relation to road openings.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the Department enhance and better promote its public information and reporting mechanisms on road openings, ensuring that they are simple to access, authoritative, and widely understood by road users.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the Department immediately commence publication of a greater proportion of the Utility performance information it already collects, including contractor-related data, so that Utility performance monitoring can be used to drive improvement.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that, once current alignment work with Highway Authorities and Utilities Committee (HAUC(UK)) is complete, the Department enhance its published information with benchmarking comparisons with neighbouring road authorities.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that within 12 months of the publication of this report the Department undertake a full evaluation of the costs and benefits of introducing performance related financial penalties for Utilities.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends that the Department, working in partnership with the Department of Finance, develop and roll out a region-wide plan to address skills gaps in its technical roles and promote opportunities across Northern Ireland.

Introduction

19. The Public Accounts Committee met on 11 December 2025 to consider the Northern Ireland Audit Office's (NIAO) report "Road Openings by Utilities". The main witnesses were:

11 December 2025, Department for Infrastructure

- **Dr. Denis McMahon**, Permanent Secretary, Department for Infrastructure;
- **Colin Woods**, Deputy Secretary Transport and Road Asset Management, Department for Infrastructure;
- **Colin Sykes**, Director of Road Asset Management, Department for Infrastructure;
- **Dorinnia Carville**, C&AG, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and
- **Stuart Stevenson**, Treasury Officer of Accounts, Department of Finance.

The Committee also requested subsequent written clarification from the Department for Infrastructure on a number of matters raised during its initial oral evidence session.

Background

20. The road network in Northern Ireland is currently in an unacceptable state of disrepair. Recent estimates highlight that the Department faces a structural

maintenance backlog of over £3.3 billion across the entire road network. Since 2015, it has operated a limited maintenance service, meaning that only the highest-priority defects are repaired each year. Lower-priority defects — many of which could be repaired at a lower cost if addressed promptly — are left to deteriorate, until they become more expensive to repair when they escalate to high priority.

21. A portion of this maintenance backlog may arise from deterioration that occurs in the years following a Utility opening and reinstating a road. While road openings by Utilities are unavoidable, the act of cutting into the road surface inevitably weakens its structural integrity. Even where reinstatements are carried out to the required standard, they cannot restore the road to its original condition and contribute to accelerated deterioration over time. This accelerated deterioration can impose substantial additional maintenance costs on the Department.

The Department cannot provide assurance that its management of Utility road openings ensures value for money

22. However, the Department currently has no means of determining the scale of such costs. This is due to the absence of a reliable methodology for measuring or estimating deterioration linked to previous Utility reinstatements. As a result, the Department cannot calculate the remedial costs associated with accelerated deterioration, nor quantify the portion of the existing backlog attributable to Utility activity. Without this information, it is unclear how much of the maintenance burden relating to these openings currently falls on taxpayers rather than Utilities.
23. The Committee believes that measuring and understanding the proportion of structural maintenance costs attributable to Utility road openings is critical to demonstrating that this aspect of network management represents value for money. In its absence, the Committee is firmly of the view that public funds spent on this type of remedial work cannot be demonstrated to achieve value for money.

24. The Committee understands that the Department's future digital mapping survey, alongside commissioned analytical work, is intended to improve its understanding of road condition and deterioration patterns. Witnesses told the Committee this work should eventually allow the Department to isolate the contribution of Utility reinstatements to network deterioration. However, until the Department can accurately measure the impact of Utility reinstatements on the backlog, it cannot provide the Committee or the taxpayer with meaningful assurance that public money on road maintenance is being spent effectively.

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that within 6 months of the publication of this report the Department develops a methodology to determine the cost of maintenance linked specifically to Utility reinstatements. The Department should use this information to determine if its cost recovery approach is appropriate and whether it is achieving value for money.

An innovative digital mapping and AI project may offer the potential for significant improvement

25. The Department informed the Committee that it is pioneering a whole-network digital mapping survey that will create a "digital twin" of the road network by the end of 2025–26. The Department stated that this project underpins many of the improvements it hopes to make to road maintenance in the coming years.
26. The Committee heard that the project will capture several billion data points through this and future annual surveys, with the data processed using Artificial Intelligence (AI). If successful, the project could provide an unprecedented level of detail on road condition, enabling earlier and more accurate identification of surface defects and the prioritisation of remedial work. The Committee was told that this represents a new and innovative approach and that the Department would be the first administration across these islands to attempt such a project at this scale.
27. The Department anticipates that the insight generated will support the development of its new Road Maintenance Strategy and improve its ability to identify defective reinstatements linked to Utility works. More accurate and

timely identification of reinstatement failures could enhance the Department's ability to intervene before warranty periods expire, increasing the likelihood that maintenance costs are met by Utilities rather than the taxpayer.

28. The Committee welcomes the ambition behind this project and recognises its potential to strengthen decision-making and reduce costs if the technology performs as envisaged. However, it is mindful that these benefits are contingent on the accuracy of the AI analysis and the Department's ability to incorporate the results into operational maintenance planning.
29. The Committee noted that witnesses alternated between using the terms "may" and "will" when describing the project's expected outputs. This reinforces the point that the project remains at an early stage and that there is currently no certainty about whether the data and AI tools will deliver the required level of diagnostic insight.
30. While the Committee commends the Department for taking forward an innovative and inherently risky project, it remains concerned that meaningful benefits may take several years to be realised. The Department will only be able to demonstrate value for money once the data has been collected, analysed, validated and applied to real-world operational decisions.
31. The Committee also heard evidence that the digital mapping project is only one element of a broader suite of technologies under consideration, including micro-coring and ground-penetrating radar. Although the Committee welcomes this openness to innovation, it notes that these tools remain exploratory and do not currently enhance the Department's ability to identify defective reinstatements.
32. Overall, the Committee concludes that while the Department is now being proactive in modernising its approach, it is doing so from a position of disadvantage. The lack of earlier investment in technology and forward planning means that several years may pass before the Department can rely on these tools to strengthen its management of reinstatements and reduce the associated cost to the taxpayer.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that within 12 months of the completion of the current mapping exercise (due 31 March 2026) the Department publishes a detailed action plan setting out how the data gathered will be used to support decision-making and action, including clear milestones, KPIs, and commitments on data transparency.

The Department should review whether the current warranty periods are appropriate and fair

33. A warranty period of between two and three years, depending on the depth of the road opening, currently applies to Utility reinstatements. This warranty exists to protect public funds by ensuring that Utilities, rather than taxpayers, pay for the rectification of substandard reinstatements. The length of the warranty period is therefore critical. If it is too short defective reinstatements may only become apparent after the warranty expires, placing unnecessary and avoidable financial pressure on constrained maintenance budgets.
34. The Committee understands that warranty periods elsewhere can be significantly longer. In Scotland the standard warranty is six years. In England a Government proposal to extend the standard warranty period to five years was rejected but has led to additional work, in conjunction with Utilities, to determine how the quality of reinstatement work can be improved. The Committee notes that these developments reflect a need to reconsider whether current warranty periods provide appropriate protection to the taxpayer and incentivise high-quality reinstatements.
35. Despite these developments, the Committee was disappointed to learn that the Department has not yet gathered sufficient data to assess whether the current warranty period in Northern Ireland is appropriate. The Committee would have expected the Department to be continuously evaluating emerging practices in neighbouring jurisdictions to determine their potential applicability locally.
36. The Committee recognises that a balance must be struck in the determination of a warranty period. Extending the warranty may increase the obligations placed on Utilities, who may ultimately pass these costs on to consumers.

However, the Committee's overriding concern is that the taxpayer in Northern Ireland is offered a fair degree of protection from the financial costs of poor quality reinstatements.

37. The Department accepted that a review of the current warranty period is needed and stated that its conclusions would ultimately be informed by new data from its digital mapping and analytical work. The Committee agrees that robust evidence will be important in determining the appropriate warranty length. However, it is concerned that the Department has not yet begun the preparatory work required to undertake this review. In the Committee's view, the review process should begin now, to ensure that decisions can be taken promptly once the necessary data becomes available, and to safeguard against further costs falling inappropriately on the taxpayer.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that within 6 months of the publication of this report the Department undertakes a review of current warranty periods in order to determine that they remain appropriate and provide value for money for taxpayers.

This review should incorporate an analysis of any methods that can be adopted by learning from neighbouring jurisdictions in relation to ensuring sufficient quality of reinstatements.

Significant weaknesses in the Department's inspection programme limit its effectiveness

38. The Department informed the Committee that its inspection programme is designed to ensure that Utility reinstatements are safe and of sufficient quality and that its sample-based approach provides statistically meaningful assurance. However, the Committee finds it difficult to reconcile this confidence with the evidence: annual visual inspection targets have not been met for the last seven years, and no core testing has been carried out since 2024. The Department accepted that this position is not ideal.

39. The Committee's view is that core testing is essential because it can detect subsurface defects that visual inspections cannot identify. The results from the Core testing programme have indicated that failure rates in recent years have been almost three times the target rate, which was a matter of particular concern to the Committee.
40. In this context, the Committee was extremely concerned to learn that core testing was suspended due to a significant human resourcing issue following an unsuccessful recruitment exercise. While the Department plans to outsource this work, the Committee considers the interruption of such a fundamental inspection activity to be unacceptable. A modern inspection programme must consistently deliver both visual and core testing to identify defects early, hold Utilities accountable, and protect public funds.
41. The Committee heard that the Department currently has no understanding of the diverging failure rate trends identified through visual and core testing. The Department acknowledged that interpreting these trends will depend on its ability to carry out a statistically valid volume of core testing in the future, and a global view of the network. The Committee understands that this will depend on the success of the outsourcing exercise as well as the outworkings from the digital mapping exercise. A clear understanding of the relationship between these two inspection methods will be vital to determining how each should be used to deliver better value for money outcomes.

The Department does not utilise risk-based sampling in its inspection programme

42. The Committee understands that the Department continues to rely solely on random sampling when selecting reinstatements for inspection. This is unlike other UK regions where risk-based approaches, including selection based on Utility performance history or location, are already in use. The Department accepted that the lack of a risk-based inspection element, previously highlighted by the NIAO, remains a weakness that must be addressed.
43. However, the Department stated that a risk-based inspection regime cannot be introduced until there is a sufficient evidence base, which it expects to emerge

from five years of data collection and analysis from the digital mapping project. The Committee was surprised that existing historical data has not been used to inform a more targeted approach and is concerned that future improvements appear to depend entirely on the success of a single project.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the Department modernise and strengthen its inspection programme as a matter of urgency. This should include:

- (i) the immediate restoration of a statistically robust core testing regime;**
- (ii) the urgent analysis of diverging visual and core failure trends; and**
- (iii) the introduction of risk-based sampling to ensure that inspection resources are targeted effectively.**

The Department does not currently have the systems needed to understand the public's experience of road openings

- 44. The Committee is concerned that disruption from Utility works continues to affect the public and businesses, and that not everything that could reasonably be done to minimise this disruption is currently being achieved. While the Department informed the Committee that Utilities provide prior notification for around 90% of road openings, the Committee believes that all non-emergency works should require appropriate advance notice, and that the Department's processes must ensure full compliance where notification obligations apply.
- 45. The Committee also highlighted concerns about the conduct of Utility contractors, including: delays, poor communication, unacceptable on-site behaviour, and a perception of inconsistent oversight by the Department. Contractors must operate to high standards, and Utilities must be held fully accountable for the actions of those operating on their behalf.

46. The Department stated that where poor Utility performance is identified, it has strengthened its ability to follow up and ensure improvement. However, it also explained that concerns about contractor performance are passed solely to the relevant Utility to manage. The Committee was concerned by this distinction and believes that contractor performance and Utility performance are inseparable: any issues arising from contractors working on behalf of a Utility should be attributed to that Utility's overall performance.
47. Although the Department provides channels for reporting, the Committee is not satisfied that these mechanisms generate the systematic, thematic insight needed to identify recurring problems, or support targeted performance improvement. The Department acknowledged that a better understanding of public satisfaction is required. The Committee welcomes the Department's recognition that contractor conduct and public disruption need to be addressed more systematically.
48. It was also clear to the Committee that many members of the public do not know which organisation is responsible for different aspects of roadworks. The Department acknowledged the high volumes of correspondence received via elected representatives regarding Utility and contractor performance. The Committee is concerned that some members of the public may feel that they must escalate issues in this way because they are unsure how to report concerns directly or have previously received unsatisfactory responses. This lack of clarity undermines the effectiveness of reporting mechanisms and contributes to confusion and frustration.
49. The Committee agrees with the Department that communication with the public should be improved and welcomes plans to make information more readily accessible. The Committee's view is that a more coherent and proactive approach is required, supported by clearer reporting mechanisms and better promotion of available channels.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that within 12 months of the publication of this report the Department establish a system capable of identifying, monitoring and reporting thematic trends in respect of public concerns about road openings, including issues related to Utilities and their contractors. The Department should ensure it uses this information to improve the public's experience and contractor performance.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that within 12 months of the publication of this report the Department reviews and, where appropriate, adopts lessons from other jurisdictions on managing and minimising disruption to the public in relation to road openings.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the Department enhance and better promote its public information and reporting mechanisms on road openings, ensuring that they are simple to access, authoritative, and widely understood by road users.

The Department performance management and reporting arrangements require improvement

50. The Department informed the Committee that it uses a suite of key performance indicators to monitor and improve Utility performance. It publishes some performance information online, while more detailed data is used for direct engagement with Utilities. The Committee also understands that elected representatives remain a significant source of information about Utility performance concerns.
51. The Department also informed the Committee that it is reviewing whether further performance-related financial penalties for Utilities should be introduced. While the Committee supports this work, it believes that financial penalties alone will not necessarily deliver improved performance. Transparent and

disaggregated reporting — including clear data on the performance of individual Utilities — is also essential.

52. The Committee was told that meaningful benchmarking of Utility performance with other UK road authorities is currently difficult due to differing legislation, operating standards, definitions and electronic systems. It welcomes, however, the Department's ongoing engagement with HAUC(UK) to improve alignment and enable comparison. The Committee believes that benchmarking against GB will strengthen transparency and place additional pressure on Utilities to improve performance.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the Department immediately commence publication of a greater proportion of the Utility performance information it already collects, including contractor-related data, so that Utility performance monitoring can be used to drive improvement.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that, once current alignment work with HAUC(UK) is complete, the Department enhance its published information with benchmarking comparisons with neighbouring road authorities.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that within 12 months of the publication of this report the Department undertake a full evaluation of the costs and benefits of introducing performance related financial penalties for Utilities.

Significant resourcing gaps are inhibiting service delivery and need to be addressed

53. The Committee heard that significant resourcing gaps within the Department — particularly in engineering, planning, and other professional and technical grades — are constraining its ability to deliver its services effectively. The Department explained that it faces strong competition from the private sector

and that sustained demand for these skills in recent years has made recruitment and retention increasingly difficult.

54. To address these shortages, the Department informed the Committee that it is adopting more innovative approaches to developing its workforce, including new pathways to build capability and bridge the gap between current skills and future operational needs.
55. The Committee recognises that challenges in recruiting and retaining professional and technical staff are experienced across the Northern Ireland Civil Service as a whole. It believes that the Department cannot resolve these issues in isolation and that a more coordinated, cross-departmental approach will be essential.
56. The Department cited its Belfast-based Assured Skills Programme pilot as an example of how it is seeking to address its skills gaps. The Committee agrees that the Programme offers young people meaningful career opportunities and has the potential to strengthen the Department's technical capability. However, it emphasises that all recruitment and development approaches must ensure equal access to opportunities across all regions, not only in specific locations.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends that the Department, working in partnership with the Department of Finance, develop and roll out a region-wide plan to address skills gaps in its technical roles and promote opportunities across Northern Ireland.

Links to Appendices

Appendix 1: Minutes of Proceedings

[View Minutes of Proceedings of Committee meetings related to the report](#)

Appendix 2: Minutes of Evidence

[View Minutes of Evidence from evidence sessions related to the report](#)

Appendix 3: Correspondence

[View correspondence issued and received related to the report](#)

Appendix 4: Other Documents

[View other documents related to the report](#)

Appendix 5: List of Witnesses that gave evidence to the Committee

- **Dr. Denis McMahon**, Department for Infrastructure;
- **Colin Woods**, Department for Infrastructure;
- **Colin Sykes**, Department for Infrastructure;
- **Ms Dorinnia Carville**, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and
- **Mr Stuart Stevenson**, Department of Finance.

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