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Addressing Public Sector Skills Gaps: a preliminary discussion

RaISe

This Briefing Paper presents a preliminary consideration of key issues regarding skills gaps in public sector organisations across the United Kingdom.



Key Points

Key elements of the current Northern Ireland skills landscape include: the development of a Skills Barometer by Ulster University; the Department for the Economy's *Skills for a 10X Economy Strategy* and the setting up of a new Skills Fund and a Northern Ireland Skills Council.

According to the latest Skills Barometer, in 2022, 83% of Northern Ireland business respondents said that their organisations currently face skills gaps, and 82% noted they see reduced output, profitability or growth as a result.

In England, a dedicated new government body to transform the skills system, *Skills England*, was established in July 2024 within the Whitehall Department for Education.

In 2023, the Scottish Government commissioned an Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape. The Review sets out recommendations for transforming skills delivery in Scotland.

In Wales, provisions contained in the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 (the 2022 Act) have significantly altered how the Welsh post-16 education and skills training sector is to be funded and regulated. Including the creation of a new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research.

In Australia, the Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) an independent statutory body, established in 2022, advises and assists the Australian Government and other stakeholders in decision-making on current, emerging and future skills needs of the Australian economy.

The New Zealand Government have developed a Policy Skills Framework to identify skills and practices required for individuals and managers across the New Zealand Government and wider public sector.

Key issues for consideration with regard to addressing skills gaps in Northern Ireland include: agreeing on a robust methodology for defining skills; the fragmentation of the skills system; the impact of skills gaps on the existing public sector workforce and assessing future skills needs in the Northern Ireland labour market.

Introduction

This Briefing Paper, prepared at the request of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), provides a consideration of key issues regarding skills gaps in the Northern Ireland public sector. For context setting, Section 1 presents a summary of the current Northern Ireland skills landscape, including background information on: Ulster University's Skills Barometer; the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Skills Strategy Northern Ireland; the Department for the Economy's Skills for a 10X Economy Strategy; a new Skills Fund and the setting up of a new Northern Ireland Skills Council. For comparison, Section 2 provides further context by summarising relevant developments in the current skills systems in England, Scotland and Wales.

Thereafter, Section 3 presents two case studies discussing government attempts to address public sector skills gaps. At the request of the PAC, the case studies consider the work of [Jobs and Skills Australia](#) and the New Zealand government's [Policy Skills Framework](#). Drawing on the previous sections, Section 4 discusses several issues, including: defining skills; the fragmentation of the skills system across the United Kingdom and in Northern Ireland in particular; the impact of skills gaps on the public sector workforce and assessing the future skills needs of the Northern Ireland economy. The Paper then concludes outlining key take-aways, for the PAC's consideration.

11 Northern Ireland Skills Landscape

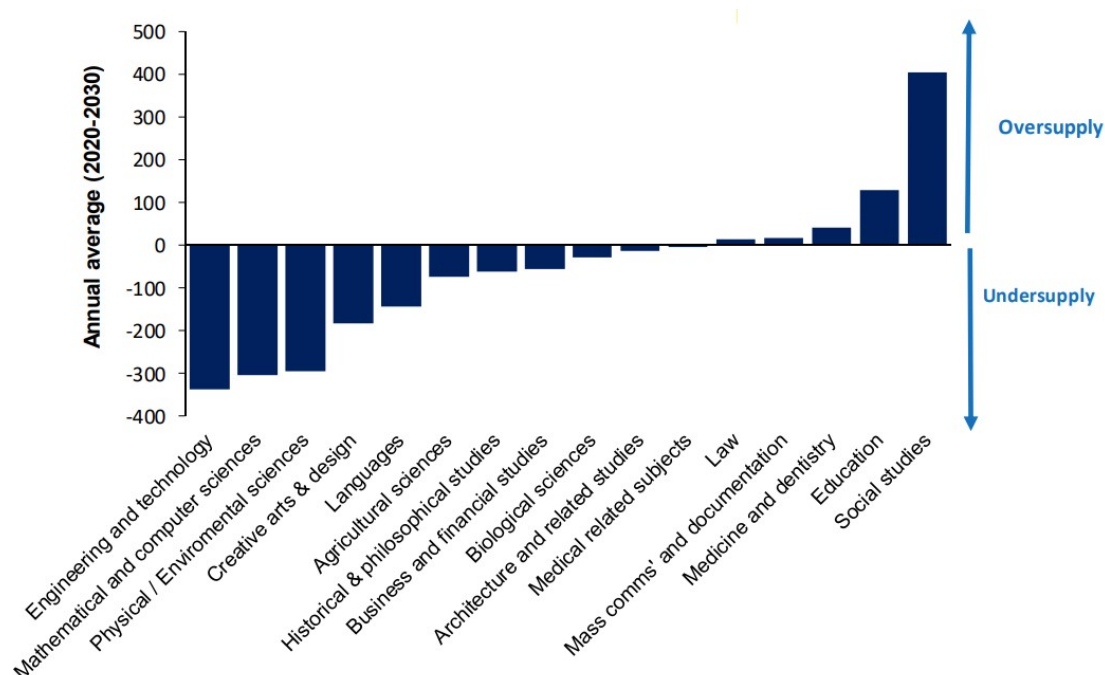
By way of context setting, this Section summarises key aspects of the Northern Ireland skills landscape.

11.1 Ulster University's Skills Barometer

The Department for the Economy (DfE) has overall responsibility for employment and skills policy in Northern Ireland. In 2014, the DfE commissioned Ulster University Economic Policy Unit (UUEPC), to produce a tool for assessing ongoing skills gaps in the Northern Ireland labour market. Subsequently, the UUEPC published the first [Northern Ireland Skills Barometer](#) in 2015.

Updated every two years, it provides the DfE with an evidence base for skills demand in the Northern Ireland. The Skills Barometer divides qualifications by three main levels: 'low or no qualifications' – qualifications at level 2 and below, that is, 5 GCSEs at grades A* - C including English and Mathematics and equivalent; 'mid-level qualifications' – ranges from level 3 (two A-Levels at A* to C and equivalent professional and technical qualifications) to Level 5 (sub-degree level higher education qualifications); and, 'higher level qualifications' – degree and post-graduate level qualifications.

According to the latest Skills Barometer, in 2022, 83% of Northern Ireland business respondents said that their organisations currently face skills gaps, and 82% noted they see reduced output, profitability or growth as a result. Figure 1 below shows the Northern Ireland skills supply gaps by subject area. As Figure 1 shows, the most notable supply gaps are in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects:

Figure 1: Northern Ireland Skills Supply Gaps:¹

Source: Northern Ireland Skills Barometer Summary Report 2022

11.2 OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland

In 2020, on behalf of the DfE, the OECD undertook a Skills Strategy Project, including an assessment and compilation of a report, containing, amongst other things, recommendations to enhance skills performance in Northern Ireland, based on the experience of OECD member countries. The report, entitled *OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland*, was published in 2020.² It identified the following four priority areas for a future Northern Ireland Skills Strategy:

- reducing skills imbalances
- creating a culture of lifelong learning
- transforming workplaces to make better use of skills
- strengthening the governance of skills policies

11.3 Skills for a 10X Economy

¹ UUEPC (2023) Northern Ireland Skills Barometer Summary Report 2021: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Skills-Barometer-2021-Summary-Report.pdf>

² OECD (2020) *Skills Strategy Northern Ireland*: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/1857c8af-en/1/3/3/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/1857c8af-en&_csp_ =c4281252015c0fc984e6f24be10f4fb9&itemI GO=oecd&itemContentType=book

Following on from the OECD report, in May 2021, the DfE announced a new skills strategy, entitled [Skills for a 10X Economy](#). Its stated aim is to provide a strategic framework for the development of the Northern Ireland skills system to 2030.³ It sets out the following three strategic goals:⁴

- increasing the proportion of individuals leaving Northern Ireland higher education institutions with first degrees and post-graduate qualifications in narrow STEM subjects
- increasing the proportion of the working age population with qualifications at level 2 and above
- increasing the proportion of the working age population with qualifications at level 3 and above.

11.4 Northern Ireland Skills Council

The Northern Ireland Skills Council (the Skills Council) was established to support the implementation of the Skills for 10X Economy Strategy. According to DfE, the Skills Council provides the primary means for stakeholder engagement throughout Northern Ireland. It aims to present the views, not only of its members, but also of wider industry and society.⁵

In June 2023, a Chair and seven members were appointed *via* public competition, for a four-year term. The first meeting of the new Skills Council was in September 2023. In addition to the Chair and publicly appointed members, ex-officio members are drawn from officials in local government, Higher Education (HE), Further Education (FE), trade unions and the community/voluntary sector, as well as senior officials from DfE, Department for Education (DE) and Department for Communities (DfC). Secretariat support is provided by DfE. Additionally, several sub-groups of the Skills Council focus on the following specific areas of interest:

- Skills Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Sub-Group

³ DfE (2021) *Skills for a 10X Economy*: <https://www.economy-NorthernIreland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/economy/skills-strategy-10x-economy-consultation.pdf>

⁴ As cited directly above.

⁵ NIAO (2024) *Developing the Skills for Northern Ireland's Future*: <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/developing-skills-northern-irelands-future>

- Digital Skills Industry Reference Group
- Green Energy Skills Industry Reference Group
- Skills Supply Task and Finish Group

11.5 Northern Ireland Skills Fund

In July 2024, the Minister for the Economy announced a new Skills Fund for Northern Ireland. Details of the proposed Skills Fund are presented in Box 1 below:

Box 1: Northern Ireland Skills Fund:⁶

- £6m to be used to fund a new Skill Up programme.
- A further £1m will fund Skills Focus and Innovate Us, both of which are delivered by further education colleges.
- Skills Focus provides tailored training to businesses with fewer than 250 employees.
InnovateUs helps businesses with fewer than 50 employees, to acquire the skills necessary to engage in innovation.
- £800k to fund green skills development. This will include new training courses and apprenticeship content.
- £740k to support pathways into the childcare sector, supporting supply of workers into this critically important sector.
- The Minister has committed to use £500k of the fund in 2024 to launch a new Public Sector apprenticeship scheme.
- £479k to support industry upskilling in partnership with our trade unions.

⁶ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/ministers-speech-update-skills-agenda-2-july-2024>

- Funding is also available to support women into STEM roles, graduates with additional needs, and a productivity booster scheme.

12 Skills Landscape in Great Britain

For comparison, this Section summarises relevant developments in the skills landscape of England, Scotland and Wales.

12.1 Skills England

Skills England was established on 22 July 2024 within the Whitehall Department for Education. In the [2024 King's Speech](#), the United Kingdom Government set out its intention to bring forward legislation that will transfer functions from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) to Skills England, creating a dedicated new government body to transform the United Kingdom skills system.⁷ The House of Lords Library describe the role of Skills England as follows:⁸

... working to identify skills gaps and needs across the United Kingdom, collaborating with the Industrial Strategy Council and Migration Advisory Council to address these gaps, and bringing together national government with combined authorities and other key stakeholders to identify system issues.

Growth and Skills Levy

The United Kingdom Government intends to introduce a [Growth and Skills Levy to replace the Apprenticeship Levy](#). The new Growth and Skills Levy will allow employers to access a wider range of training with their funding. Under the apprenticeship levy, employers are only able to spend their apprenticeship levy funding on apprenticeship training and assessment costs. Skills England will determine which training will be eligible for the expanded levy.

⁷ [Skills England report: driving growth and widening opportunities - GOV.UK](#)

⁸ House of Lords Library Briefing (2024) *Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill [HL]* <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/lln-2024-0061/>

Occupations in demand index

In September 2024, Skills England published an occupations in demand index which ranks the demand for each occupation across the United Kingdom labour market. Occupations were put into one of three categories: in critical demand, in elevated demand, or not in high demand. In April 2023 to March 2024, 7.8% of the United Kingdom workforce were found to be in critical demand occupations, while a further 38.5% were in elevated demand occupations.⁹

12.2 Skills Landscape in Scotland

In the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, the Scottish Government commissioned several reviews looking at the future of education and skills. These are presented in Box 2 below:

Box 2: Post Covid-19 Skills Reviews in Scotland

The [2020 review of the Scottish technology ecosystem](#) carried out by Professor Mark Logan considered Scotland's technology sector's potential contribution to economic recovery following COVID-19.

The Scottish Funding Council's 2021 [Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability](#) sets out recommendations for a system change for higher education.

The 2023 [Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape](#) carried out by James Withers sets out recommendations for transforming the skills delivery landscape.

The 2023 [Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](#) sets out recommendations that will impact on higher education and training.

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/occupations-in-demand-in-2024>

Following the publication of these reviews, the Scottish Government published [Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills](#) in June 2023; providing a framework intended to set the overarching policy direction. The overall purpose of the system is to develop new thinking and approaches through evidence-based research and ensure that individuals have opportunities to develop skills, knowledge, values and attributes to fulfil their potential. Creating parity of esteem for post-school learning pathways is a key aim of the framework and a recurring theme in the Skills Review. It appears likely that parity of learning pathways and support for all learners to achieve their full potential will become a key element of policy in the years ahead.¹⁰

Reforms will also be aligned with the [Scottish Government's National Strategy for Economic Transformation \(NSET\)](#), published in March 2022. This Strategy sets out priorities for the economy up to 2032. [Chapter 5 of NSET](#) sets out priorities for developing a skilled workforce. It includes plans to make the education and skills system more responsive; support people and employers to invest in skills and training throughout their lives; and attract key talent from the rest of the United Kingdom.

12.3 Skills Landscape in Wales

In Wales, provisions contained in the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 (the 2022 Act) have significantly altered how the Welsh post-16 education and skills training sector is to be funded and regulated.¹¹ The 2022 Act dissolves the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and creates a new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER). From 1 August 2024, CTER regulates and funds:¹²

- further education
- higher education, including research and innovation
- apprenticeships
- adult community learning

¹⁰ Spice (2023) Post-School Education Reform

¹¹ <https://www.gov.wales/tertiary-education-and-research-wales-act>

¹² <https://www.medr.cymru/en/>

- local authority maintained school sixth forms.

The 2022 Act also sets out the following strategic duties for the CTER:¹³

- promoting lifelong learning
- promoting equality of opportunity
- encouraging participation
- promoting continuous improvement
- promoting research & innovation
- promoting collaboration & coherence
- sustainable & innovative economy
- promoting Welsh medium study
- promoting a civic mission
- promoting collaboration between providers & Trade Unions
- promoting a global outlook.

It is expected that [CTER's budget will be around £800m](#), which will be “one of the highest allocated budgets to an arm's length body in Wales.

13 Government Attempts to Address Public Sector Skills Gaps: Australia and New Zealand Case Studies

This Section presents two case studies concerning government attempts to address public sector skills gaps. At the request of the PAC, it first looks at the work of [Jobs and Skills Australia](#) and secondly considers the New Zealand Government's [Policy Skills Framework](#) .

13.1 Jobs and Skills Australia

Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) is an independent statutory body, established in 2022 under the [Jobs and Skills Australia Act 2022](#). Its role is to advise and assist the Australian Government and other stakeholders in decision-making on the current, emerging and future skills and workforce needs of the Australian economy.

¹³ As cited immediately above.

JSA leads work on occupation shortage analysis including an annual Occupation Shortage List (OSL) and reports on occupation shortages. The OSL provides a detailed view of occupations in shortage in Australian and by each state and territory. It is released annually as a point-in-time assessment of the labour market. Figure 2 below shows a sample OSL for a construction project manager. As that Figure shows, prior to 2024, there were shortages for this occupation in all Australian regions and territories. However, in 2024, there now are no shortages in Victoria (VIC), South Australia (SA), Tasmania (TAS) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT):

Figure 2: Sample OSL for a construction project manager¹⁴

Construction Project Manager ×

ANZSCO code 133111
Skill level 1

Year	AUS	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT
2024	S	S	NS	S	NS	S	NS	S	NS
Previous years									
2023	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
2022	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
2021	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S

Source: JSA (2024)

¹⁴ <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/data/occupation-shortages-analysis/occupation-shortage-list>

Skills Taxonomy

A skills taxonomy is the practice of organising skills into distinct categories or clusters based on their definition. Skills taxonomies can vary in their detail, structure, and definitions. JSA is currently working to develop a National Skills Taxonomy (NST). The development of a NST is an attempt to think of the skills and competencies required to do a job, separate from formal qualifications. JSA note the benefits of a NST as follows:¹⁵

A skills taxonomy seeks to categorise and organise the various skills to provide a common language for workers, employers, training providers, and educators. By systematically laying out the skills that underpin Australia's workforce, a National Skills Taxonomy provides a bridge across the other three foundational taxonomies - occupation, qualification and industry. The enhanced understanding this enables contributes to a more dynamic and responsive skills ecosystem that can better meet the demands of rapidly changing communities and economies within the limits of existing licensing and regulatory frameworks.

Jobs and Skills Councils

JSA have also developed a number of Jobs and Skills Councils to:¹⁶

...provide industry with a stronger voice to ensure Australia's vocational education and training (VET) sector delivers better outcomes for learners and employers.

Public Skills Australia is the Jobs and Skills Council for the Public Safety and Government industry, which includes Correctional Services, Defence, Federal, State/Territory and Local Government, Fire and Emergency Services and Police. It works closely with industry employers and employee organisations, to identify and mitigate workforce challenges and support future skilling. Public Skills Australia is committed to:¹⁷

¹⁵ [National Skills Taxonomy Discussion Paper | Jobs and Skills Australia](#)

¹⁶ <https://www.dewr.gov.au/skills-reform/jobs-and-skills-councils>

¹⁷ Public Skills Australia (2024) *Federal, State/Territory & Local Government: Workforce Plan 2024*: <https://publicskillsaustralia.org.au/2024-workforce-plans>

- conducting consultation with key industry-sectors and their representatives
- undertaking data analysis, research and employing strategic foresight tools to understand current workforce challenges and develop future workforce plans
- developing quality training products to strengthen the Public Safety and Government training packages
- advocating for the needs of our industry-sectors.

Public Skills Australia publishes annual [Workforce Plans](#), providing a snapshot of all Public Safety and Government industry-sectors, their workforce, and identified workforce challenges. In 2024, there are Workforce Plans in place for the following public sector industries:

- Defense
- Correctional Services
- Fire and Emergency Services
- Government
- Police

13.2 New Zealand Policy Skills Framework

In 2016, the New Zealand Prime Minister announced a new [Policy Skills Framework](#) (PSF). to identify **knowledge, behaviours, applied skills** and **practices** required to be able to deliver quality policy advice. Individuals and managers can use the PSF to identify their own or organisational skills gaps. Figure 3 below presents the PSF triangle:

Figure 3: The New Zealand PSF Triangle¹⁸

¹⁸ New Zealand Government (2023) *Policy Skills Framework*:
<https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/publications/policy-skills-framework-te-anga-pukenga-kaupapahere#acknowledgements>






Source: New Zealand Government (2023)

Applying the Framework

The PSF provides individuals and managers with a set of detailed descriptors to identify their current level of skills and capabilities, and/or the levels they want to develop in. Each set of descriptors is expressed at three levels, developing, practicing and leading, as shown below in Figure 4:

Figure 4: Sample PSF Skills Descriptor¹⁹

¹⁹ As cited directly above.

<h2>Policy Analysis</h2> <p>Applies analytical frameworks and methods to make sense of evidence and inform policy advice.</p>		
DEVELOPING 	PRACTISING 	LEADING 
<input type="checkbox"/> Are learning about the fundamentals of good quality policy analysis needed to determine what to advise decision makers, including identifying: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> for a policy issue: what and who is affected, where, how much, and what the root causes of the pattern of adverse outcomes are <input type="checkbox"/> for an opportunity: its scale, what factors have given rise to it, and how they can be leveraged to maximise benefits <input type="checkbox"/> the impacts of current policy settings on the issue or opportunity <input type="checkbox"/> policy objectives that flow logically from the problem or opportunity definition <input type="checkbox"/> assessing options (using relevant criteria) to make impacts clear and reveal workable solutions that meet the policy objectives. <input type="checkbox"/> Are learning about the range of analytical frameworks and tools that can illuminate key matters and help you identify, analyse, and make sense of evidence. This can include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> sectoral and system frameworks (like the Living Standards Framework and the Natural Resources Sector Framework) <input type="checkbox"/> academic disciplines and mātauranga Māori <input type="checkbox"/> frameworks to identify Māori rights and interests in Treaty analysis, and Te Ao Māori perspectives <input type="checkbox"/> purpose-built tools for assessing impacts of policy issues and solutions for different population groups (e.g. age, gender, disability, ethnicity) <input type="checkbox"/> decision-making frameworks (such as cost-benefit analysis). <input type="checkbox"/> Are learning how to prepare draft analysis that reflects the standards for analysis set out in the Policy Quality Framework.	<input type="checkbox"/> Have deeper and broader experience in applying and understanding the underlying assumptions, strengths, and limitations of analytical frameworks. <input type="checkbox"/> Work with others to identify and use frameworks and methods of analysis, appropriate to different situations and complexities of policy challenges (e.g. person-centred, system-oriented, Te Ao Māori frameworks). <input type="checkbox"/> Are transparent about how issues are framed within your policy analysis (inherent bias) and any gaps in evidence. <input type="checkbox"/> Can make sense of evidence, analyse it, and turn it into insightful advice that tells a coherent story about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – the context and the problem or opportunity including its scale, immediacy and causes, and the needs, views, and values of those impacted – the policy objectives and intentions – relevant Māori rights and interests including in Treaty settlement commitments – any likely risks and how to mitigate and manage them – possible options with likely impacts clearly identified, and the most workable solutions and any trade-offs revealed – the recommended pathway to achieving desired outcomes. <input type="checkbox"/> Guide less experienced staff to undertake specific policy analysis and synthesis of different forms of evidence, and can identify, direct, or commission specialists where particular expertise is required.	<input type="checkbox"/> Can synthesise and translate complex evidence into insightful and robust analysis that supports advice by continuously: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – testing underlying assumptions and bias – being transparent about the impact of any gaps in evidence on the analysis – testing the feasibility of a wide range of policy options and the likely benefits, costs, and risks for different communities and stakeholders while recognising the lived experience and views of those potentially impacted – identifying and assessing workable options against criteria (e.g. effectiveness, equity, efficiency) to reveal any trade-offs – considering how to enhance Māori Crown relationships. <input type="checkbox"/> Lead the application or development of common frameworks, principles, methodologies, tools, and techniques, relevant to the sector or the whole policy system. <input type="checkbox"/> Lead and coach others in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – identifying root causes or factors that underpin the policy challenge or opportunity and desired outcomes – applying standard and emerging methods of analysis – employing different types of thinking (e.g. critical, creative, exploratory) to find breakthrough methods to understand and develop solutions to challenging problems.

Source: New Zealand Government (2023)

Using the information contained in the relevant descriptors, workers and/or managers can then map their skills profile using a supplied PSF worksheet template, see Figure 5 below:

Figure 5: Sample PSF Skills Mapping Template²⁰

Worksheet – Map your policy skills profile

Use the detailed descriptors in the Policy Skills Framework as a guide to rate yourself as Developing, Practising, or Leading for each Knowledge, Applied skill, Practice, and Behaviour element. Consider which elements are most important to your current role and future roles you aspire to.

	Developing	Practising	Leading	Notes (e.g. areas I want to develop, training I might need)
KNOWLEDGE				
BEHAVIOURS				
APPLIED SKILLS				
PRACTICES				

Name:

Manager:


Date:

Insights about skills profile


Priorities for development

Agreed next steps


Map your policy skills profile with the Policy Skills Framework was released in July 2023 by the Policy Project. It can also be downloaded as an [editable PDF](#).




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The Policy Project

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Source: New Zealand Government (2023)

²⁰ New Zealand Government (2023) *Policy Skills Framework*: <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/publications/policy-skills-framework-te-anga-pukenga-kaupapahere#acknowledgements>

Managers have a separate template which they can use to map their team's skills profile. Completed templates provide the organisation with a 'map' of the worker and/or team's capabilities, including insights on areas for development. Additionally, the PSF provides an online, interactive Development Pathways Tool containing practical suggestions for workers and/or managers on how to improve all skills levels contained in the PSF. Users select the skill to develop and the development level they want to achieve. Figure 6 below presents the Policy Analysis development pathway at the "Practicising" level. As Figure 6 below demonstrates, this level requires 70% on-the-job learning, 20% learning from others and 10% formal training:

Figure 6: Sample PSF Development Pathway Tool (policy analysis- practice level)

DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS TOOL	
Policy Analysis	
Practicising	
<p>Applies analytical frameworks and methods to make sense of evidence and inform policy advice.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has deeper and broader experience in applying different analytical frameworks, and understands their underlying assumptions and limitations and their appropriateness for different types and complexities of policy challenges. Can make sense of evidence and turn it into insightful advice that tells a coherent story (e.g. about the problem or opportunity, its magnitude and causes, who is affected and how, and a proposed pathway to achieve desired outcomes) – while being transparent about how issues are framed (inherent bias) and gaps in evidence. Can guide less experienced staff to undertake specific analysis and identify, direct or commission specialists where particular expertise is required.
70% on-the-job learning	
<input type="checkbox"/> Lead medium to complex policy design and development projects. Undertake a Regulatory impact assessment.	<input type="checkbox"/> Apply other population frameworks and lenses to your policy work (e.g. Ministry for Pacific People's Pacific Policy Analysis Tool Kapasa , Ministry of Social Development's Child Impact Assessment Tool , Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People's Disability Toolkit for Policy , Ministry for Women's gender analysis tool Bringing Gender In).
<input type="checkbox"/> Lead discussions on analytical frameworks and approaches to policy projects with internal and external groups.	<input type="checkbox"/> Translate evidence into a compelling story about your analysis of policy issues and solutions. Use different mediums (e.g. words, graphics, diagrams, charts, tables) to present the information in an easily digestible way. Write a discussion document.
<input type="checkbox"/> Look for opportunities to participate in developing innovative policy approaches to 'wicked problems'.	<input type="checkbox"/> Develop networks with technical experts who can provide input into problem identification, approaches to framing policy, and resolution.
<input type="checkbox"/> Talk to policy analysis experts in your agency to identify relevant practices and approaches.	<input type="checkbox"/> Coach or mentor less experienced analysts on how to choose and apply the 'best fit for purpose' analytical frameworks for policy problems.
<input type="checkbox"/> Work with specialists in behavioural science to identify and use psychological and sociological techniques to deliver public policy outcomes (e.g. 'nudge').	<input type="checkbox"/> Participate in your agency's policy quality assurance processes, such as regulatory impact analysis and Cabinet paper committees.
<input type="checkbox"/> Work with specialists in future thinking to identify and use futures techniques in policy development.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Apply Te Ao Māori knowledge and approaches and mātauranga Māori to your policy work, and understand and explore the areas where a Te Ao Māori lens suggests a different direction to other analytical frameworks.	
20% learning from others	
<input type="checkbox"/> Make connections with external experts in the application of frameworks, analytical methods and practices for specific policy projects.	
10% formal training	
<input type="checkbox"/> Take courses on different methodologies and analytical frameworks.	<input type="checkbox"/> Take a course on critical thinking.

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Source: New Zealand Government (2023)

In 2017, an OECD report noted that the PSF can be a very effective tool to analyse any existing skills gaps in the New Zealand civil service or wider public sector, stating:²¹

... the skills framework will help policy managers articulate the skills mix they require when recruiting, and help them to map the overall skills profile of their teams and any gaps and overlaps.

14 Issues for Consideration

This Section discusses key issues, including: defining skills; the fragmentation of the skills system in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom; the impact of skills shortages on the public sector; and, assessing the future skills needs of the Northern Ireland public sector.

14.1 Defining Skills

Achieving a common definition of skills is challenging. Organisations, industries and sectors each have multiple definitions for the term “skills”.²² In 2020, the NIAO published [Capacity and Capability in the NI Civil Service](#). A key finding of that report was:²³

...the NICS has not yet adequately identified and provided a clear definition of the functional skill sets necessary for a high performing, modern NICS such as project management, commercial, contract management, data and digital technology, fraud and debt.

And:

...the lack of any central record of the skills and experience of NICS staff means there is no way of assessing if they are being utilised in areas that best match their abilities.

²¹ OECD (2017) *Public Sector skills in the search for public value*.

²² JSA (2023) *National Skills Taxonomy Discussion Paper*.
<https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/consultations/national-skills-taxonomy-discussion-paper>

²³ NIAO (2020) *Capacity and Capability in the Northern Ireland Civil Service*:
<https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/capacity-and-capability-northern-ireland-civil-service-0>

Box 3 below presents the key findings and recommendations of the NIAO 2020 report, with regard to defining and identifying skills gaps in the Northern Ireland Civil Services (NICS):

Box 3: NIAO 2020 Report Skills Recommendations

- The NICS should formally identify the professional, technical and functional skills it requires to successfully deliver current and future government programmes.
- Each NICS department, applying the same overall methodology and using the same definitions, should undertake formal and ongoing skills audits, to capture intelligence about existing workforce skills, background and experience and store this information on a centralised database.
- A skills gap analysis, focusing on critical skills such as project management, commercial, contract management, data and digital technology, fraud and debt, should be undertaken. The NICS should outline how these skills will be acquired and developed within its workforce.

Skills or Qualifications?

In 2022, the Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) published a report [Employer Views on Skills Policy in the UK](https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/reports/employer-skills-view-uk/). That report revealed that many employers are using generic degree qualifications to screen candidates, reducing employment opportunities and contributing to ongoing skills gaps.²⁴ It reported that 84% of organisations in the public sector are most likely to look for individuals with specific qualifications, in particular degree-level applicants. The report also highlighted how certain sectors (health and care) often use formal qualifications to as a way to sift through and filter large volumes of applications.

²⁴ CIPD (2022) *Employer Views on Skills Policy in the UK*:
<https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/reports/employer-skills-view-uk/>

CIPD note the following with regard to this approach:²⁵

This type of practice disadvantages applicants who may have relevant experience, but not the relevant qualification, and is a challenge for older workers in particular, who will have more experience, but are least likely to have formal qualifications.

As mentioned above in subsection 3.1 of this Paper, JSA's development of an Australian National skills Taxonomy (NST) is an attempt to define skills and competencies of a job outside formal qualifications. However, the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer used by the DfE, relies almost exclusively on formal qualifications to assess skills capabilities and does not consider any job competencies or experience:

Potential Scrutiny Points:

- Has the Northern Ireland Executive or the DfE undertaken any work into the development of a national skills taxonomy for the Northern Ireland Civil Service or the wider labour force? If so, please provide any relevant details. If not, would it consider undertaking such an assessment, adapted for Northern Ireland purposes, as appropriate?
- Has the Executive or the DfE considered using an alternative method of assessing the skills capabilities of the Northern Ireland labour force other than the Skills Barometer? If so, please detail any methods under consideration

14.2 Fragmentation of the Skills System

In September 2024, Skills England published [Driving Growth and Widening Opportunities](#). That report provides a detailed assessment of the United Kingdom's skills needs. It highlights several challenges to be overcome to

²⁵ CIPD (2022) *Employer Views on Skills Policy in the UK*:
<https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/reports/employer-skills-view-uk/>

create a high-performing skills system. One such challenge is the disparate and disconnected nature of the current skills system in the United Kingdom:²⁶

For the skills system to enable opportunity and be equipped to fill the skills gaps [...], its different parts must become more coherent, underpinned by a unified, authoritative assessment of skills needs in the economy.

Also in September 2024, the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) published, [Developing the Skills for Northern Ireland's Future](#). That report notes several shortcomings in the governance arrangements that support key areas with regard to skills provision in Northern Ireland. As part of NIAO's evidence base for the report, it issued a survey to selected stakeholders (primarily industry bodies, employer representative bodies, or FE and HE education providers). Common issues reported by stakeholders in response to that survey included :

- businesses find the skills landscape confusing to navigate.
- delivery of skills provision is fragmented.
- a lack of a coherent approach to skills interventions both across government departments and within individual departments.

Recommendation 5 of the report states:²⁷

DfE must review, streamline and clarify the governance and oversight arrangements for skills in Northern Ireland and ensure that the skills system can be more easily navigated by stakeholders. It should clearly set out the roles and responsibilities of the different bodies in the skills system and eradicate unnecessary overlap.

And:

This review should clarify how these bodies will successfully interact with each other to establish a coherent and effective approach to address existing skills shortages and future skills needs in Northern

²⁶ Skills England (2024) *Driving Growth and Widening Opportunities*: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-england-report-driving-growth-and-widening-opportunities>

²⁷ <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/developing-skills-northern-irelands-future>

Ireland.

Potential Scrutiny Points:

- What steps has the Executive or the DfE taken to address the fragmentation of the skills system in Northern Ireland? Please detail.
- What consideration has the DfE given to the NIAO recommendation to review, streamline and clarify the governance and oversight arrangements for skills in Northern Ireland? Please give details.
- Has any consideration been given in this regard to creating an independent single skills body like Skills England or the JSA in Australia? If so, please provide details. If not, please explain why not.

14.3 Impact of Skills Gaps on the Public Sector

Every year, the Open University (OU) conduct a survey into skills gaps in the United Kingdom labour force. The survey asks a range of organisations about the supply and demand of skills and how skills gaps may impact the workforce. The OU, in partnership with the British Chambers of Commerce, publish results in an annual report known as the [Business Barometer](https://business.open.ac.uk/business-barometer). The latest report, published June 2024, found that skills gaps are endemic across all sectors but are more acute in the public sector (66%). The report stated that skills gaps are having a detrimental impact on public sector workers with increased workloads leading to problems with morale and wellbeing in particular. Public sector workers reported that skills shortages have led to:²⁸

- increased workloads (78%)
- reduced staff morale/wellbeing (56%)
- reduced activity or output (43%)

²⁸ OU (2024) *Business Barometer*. <https://business.open.ac.uk/business-barometer-2024>

- an inability to achieve strategic goals (30%)

Absence of Written Skills Plan

The Business Barometer survey asked participants what their organisation is doing to address skills gaps. Only 20% of public sector organisations have a written skills plan in place for the coming year, 44% don't have a written plan and 36% don't know if this is one or not. When asked why their organisation did not have a skills plan, 26% of those working in the public sector said it was due to a lack of resource or skill to write or implement a plan. A total of 19% say skills needs are changing too rapidly and 37% don't see the benefits of a plan.²⁹ The data suggest there could be a lack of communication and transparency, particularly in larger public sector organisations, especially with regard to skills planning.

Potential Scrutiny Points

- Has the Executive or the DfE undertaken any work to assess the impact of skills shortages in the NICS or the wider public sector? If so, please detail. If not, please explain why not.
- If such an assessment has been undertaken, how does the Executive or the DfE now intend to improve the situation? Please provide details.
- How commonplace are written skills plans across the NICS and the wider public sector?
- Has the Executive or the DfE any plans to introduce mandatory written skills plans across the NICS?

14.4 Assessing Future Skills

²⁹ As cited directly above.

Navigating future skills needs is a primary concern for all governments in light of evolving industry demands and technological advancements. Globally, the move towards a green economy and increased usage of technology and artificial intelligence (AI) will doubtless create new jobs requiring new skills in the coming years. As the United Kingdom economy targets net zero by 2050,³⁰ there will be greater demand for green skills in the workforce, which will vary over time. There will also be an increased risk of more skills gaps.

In 2024, the OU Business Barometer survey participants were asked about new AI, digital and green technologies. Responses showed that overall, 64% are not confident about applying either AI or green technologies.³¹ In Northern Ireland, 67% are not confident about AI technology and 49% are not confident about green technology. Box 4 below presents a key recommendation from the Business Barometer report about assessing future AI and green technology skills:

Box 4: Business Barometer AI and Green Skills

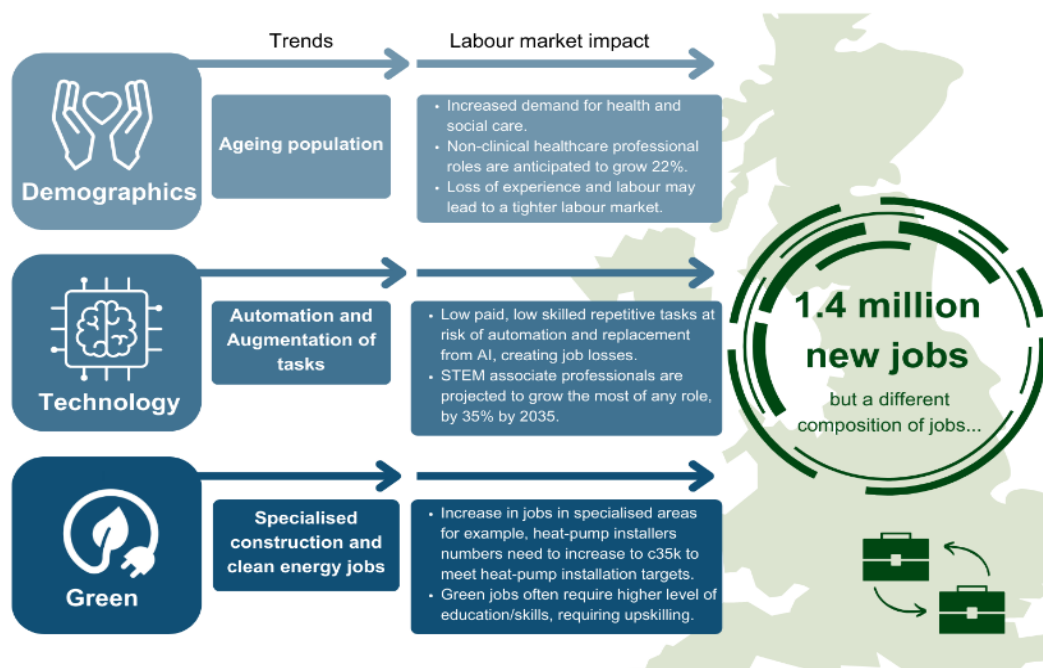
Recommendation: Identify areas of the business impacted by AI and green technology and build capability:

Organisations of all types should assess which parts of their operations can benefit from AI and green technologies, such as workflow automation, customer service, supply chain optimisation, and production methods. Building capability involves upskilling existing employees through targeted training programmes and speaking with specialists and other organisations which have made similar innovations.

Here, it is interesting to note that the 2024 Skills England report, [Driving growth and widening opportunities](#), states that United Kingdom employment is expected to grow modestly by 2035, with 1.4million new jobs. Relying on that

³⁰ United Kingdom Government (2019). *The Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019*: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2019/9780111187654>

³¹ OU (2024) *Business Barometer*: <https://business.open.ac.uk/business-barometer-2024>

Figure 7: Megatrends impacting the future labour market³²

Source: Skills England Analysis Infographic (2024)

Potential Scrutiny Points:

- What steps have the Executive or the DfE taken to assess the future skills needs of the Northern Ireland labour force? Please detail. If it has not, please explain why.
- What consideration has the Executive or the DfE given to the impact of either AI or green technologies on the future Northern Ireland labour force? Please give details. If it has not, please explain why.

³² As cited directly above.

15 Concluding Remarks

Over the past decade, the Northern Ireland skills landscape has changed considerably. Ulster University's Skills Barometer undoubtedly has been a useful tool in assessing current and future skills requirements of the public sector and wider economy. The DfE's Skills for a 10X Economy Strategy, the setting up of a new Skills Fund and a Northern Ireland Skills Council all are welcome attempts to address skills gaps. However, significant gaps remain, most notably in the STEM related sector, posing questions about how those gaps could be efficiently and effectively addressed.

Looking to other jurisdictions could be instructive in that regard. For example, as highlighted earlier in the Paper, in England, the Whitehall Department for Education has introduced a new dedicated government body to address issues in the English and wider United Kingdom skills system. Skills England was established in July 2024 and it could be useful to maintain a watching brief on how that body seeks to advance its work and any progress that it makes. In particular, it would perhaps be prudent for the Northern Ireland Executive and the DfE to monitor any future evaluation of Skills England's performance. That could assist decision making in terms of whether or not a similar stand-alone body in Northern Ireland may be effective. Similarly, it may be prudent for the Executive and DfE to monitor the progress of the JSA in Australia and the use of the PSF in New Zealand in this regard.

Finally, key issues such as: establishing an agreed methodology for the defining of skills; the fragmentation of the skills system; the impact of skills gaps on the existing public sector workforce and assessing future skills needs, all provide considerable challenges for policy makers in Northern Ireland going forward.