



ACCESSNI PERFORMANCE AND ACTIVITY REPORT

1 APRIL 2022 - 31 MARCH 2023

Glossary:	
Basic Check:	Provides unspent criminal record information. Cost is £18.
Standard Check:	Provides both spent and unspent criminal record information. The 'position applied for' must be exempt from Rehabilitation of Offenders legislation. Cost is £18 (free to volunteers).
Enhanced Check:	As per Standard checks, plus relevant police 'non-conviction' information and, where eligible, check of lists of those barred from working with vulnerable groups. The 'position applied for' must be prescribed in AccessNI Regulations. Cost is £33 (free to volunteers).



Department of
Justice

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt

Máinnystrie O tha Laa

www.justice-ni.gov.uk

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Section 1 - Introduction

1. This document sets out details of AccessNI's activity over the 12 month period from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, noting performance against targets and where appropriate, providing a comparison to previous years.
2. 2022/23 saw a significant uplift in the volume of Enhanced disclosure applications submitted to AccessNI, leading to the busiest operational year ever for the Branch.
3. As with many NI Civil Service staff, AccessNI staff now have workstyle agreements in place, with most working a hybrid arrangement which combines working from home with attendance in the office as business needs require.
4. For 2022/23 AccessNI set a target of issuing 60% of certificates digitally. This target was not achieved as 57% of certificates were delivered digitally. [\[Section 2\]](#)
5. AccessNI met all but one of the time-bounded targets set by the Minister of Justice for the issue of certificates. [\[Section 3\]](#)
6. AccessNI certificates provide a significant level of criminal record and other information on applicants thereby contributing to the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults in Northern Ireland. Ten applications from individuals not permitted to work with children and/or vulnerable adults were detected, and appropriate action taken.
7. The Independent Reviewer scheme operated throughout 2022/23. This scheme enables applicants to ask for an independent review of spent criminal record information disclosed on a certificate or, where all the criminal record information to be disclosed relates to a time when the applicant was under 18 years of age, an automatic review to be undertaken. The scheme has worked smoothly with few delays and positive outcomes for the overwhelming majority of applicants. [\[Section 4\]](#)

8. AccessNI's operational costs reduced slightly in 2022/23, compared to the previous year. This is primarily due to the additional costs incurred in 2021/22 in exiting the IT support arrangements provided through the NICS Strategic Development Partnership contract no longer being liable.
9. Increases were noted in variable costs in 2022/23 due to higher level of demand for checks, and associated costs in processing these.
10. AccessNI continued to work with the UK Central Authority for the exchange of criminal record information (ACRO) to obtain information on nationals from EU Member States seeking to work with children in NI [[Section 5](#)].
11. AccessNI resolved 7 disputes raised by applicants where AccessNI had made an error [[Section 6](#)].
12. Income increased in 2022/23 compared to the previous year reflecting the higher number of disclosure applications received in AccessNI. This increased demand for checks led to an overall surplus in the year-end cost recovery position. [[Section 7](#)]
13. 76 organisations registered for the first time with AccessNI during 2022/23. At 31 March 2023 there were 620 statutory, private, voluntary and community groups with approved Registered Body status, and 132 organisations with Responsible Body status. 178 audits were undertaken to ensure organisations were complying with the statutory based Code of Practice – these audits were all undertaken by way of video conference. As a result of these audits, a number of organisations were asked to provide additional information to assure AccessNI of their compliance with the Code, with one organisation de-registered. AccessNI delivered 24 Registered Body training events to a total of 1,233 attendees. [[Section 8](#)]
14. During the year AccessNI continued to explore enhancements to both the Citizen and Administration aspects of the IT Business Solution. Workshops were held with a selection of staff and users / customers and potential service improvements were noted and shared with the IT supplier for

implementing. Some minor enhancements have been successfully implemented. [[Section 9](#)]

15. Looking to 2023/24, the key challenges will be to:-

- Meet Ministerial targets for the issue of checks;
- Contribute to a review the List of Specified Offences;
- Consider and implement further enhancements to the AccessNI IT solution for staff and citizens;
- Introduce wider improvements to the AccessNI service, including:-
 - Training delivery
 - Registered Body Survey
 - Conducting Registered Body audits
- Work with Home Office to transition from Police National Computer (PNC) to Law Enforcement Data Service (LEDS);
- Provide portable certificates by integrating with the Disclosure and Barring Service's Update Service;
- Extend use of Digital Certificates;
- Introduce digital identity checking through NIDA Level of Assurance (LOA)2;
- Develop a retention and disposal solution in relation to information on applicants and others held by AccessNI and update the AccessNI privacy statement;
- Consider impact of wider policy decisions on disclosure process, including potential amendments to rehabilitation periods in NI.
- Improve AccessNI's ability to use management information;
- Monitor income and expenditure against AccessNI's cost recovery model;
- Review processes with regards to managing aged debts;
- Review the Registered / Responsible Body network; and
- Monitor compliance among registered organisations with the AccessNI Code of Practice.

Section 2 – Applications received and processed

16. Tables 1 and 2 show the number of applications received and processed by AccessNI in 2022/23 compared to the previous two years. To assist the on-going response to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, AccessNI has been prioritising applications from hosts / sponsors under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. In 2022/23, 1,467 applications were processed under this scheme, with an average turnaround of 2½ days. All other applications were processed in chronological order.

Table 1 – Applications received

Disclosure type	Apr 2020 - Mar 2021	Apr 2021- Mar 2022	Apr 2022- Mar 2023	% change 21/22 – 22/23
Basic (B)	30,730	42,902	42,738	-0.38%
Standard (S)	4,145	5,597	4,586	-18.06%
Enhanced (E)	84,105	116,701	129,000	+10.54%
Total	118,980	165,200	176,324	+6.73%

Table 2 – Applications processed

Disclosure type	Apr 2020 - Mar 2021	Apr 2021- Mar 2022	Apr 2022- Mar 2023	% change 21/22 – 22/23
Basic (B)	29,074	41,344	42,083	+1.93%
Standard (S)	3,965	5,581	4,577	-17.99%
Enhanced (E)	84,814	115,835	127,653	+10.20%
Total	117,853	162,760	174,313	+7.10%

17. Staff in AccessNI continued to work a hybrid approach, with rotas in place for office attendance to meet specific business needs.

Volunteer certificates

18. Where an applicant meets the statutory definition of a volunteer, no fee is payable for the certificate (Standard and Enhanced checks only). AccessNI noted that demand for volunteer checks reduced significantly in the first year of the pandemic (to 12.9% of all Enhanced applications). 2022/23 has seen the level of volunteer checks return closer to the pre-pandemic position with 24% of all Enhanced checks being for volunteers. This figure is approximately 2% down on the average pre-pandemic position, but the overall trajectory is moving in that direction.

Digital certificates

19. In July 2018, AccessNI introduced digital certificates for all types of disclosures where no criminal record or other information was included in that certificate, or where the applicant lives outside the UK. Digital certificates are delivered to the nidirect account used by the applicant when making their online application. The applicant can share the certificate by email with an employer, but these certificates are “invalid” if printed. Digitally issued certificates allow applicants to receive their certificate more quickly and safely than the traditional postal method required for paper certificates. Paper certificates continue to be used for all certificates that disclose information.

Table 3 – Digital certificates

Target	Achievement	Met
60% of certificates issued digitally by 31 March 2023.	57% of certificates issued digitally over the year.	X

20. In 2022/23, the target of 60% was not achieved – it may be the case that the preference for this type of certificate has plateaued at this point in time. AccessNI has set a target for 2023/24 of exceeding 60% of certificates delivered digitally by 31 March 2024. In order to improve uptake in this regard, AccessNI will continue to deliver regular messages to Registered / Responsible Bodies impressing on them the advantages of digital certificates.

21. During 2023/24, AccessNI will also be considering the merits of extending digital certificates to include criminality information.

Police referrals

22. Approximately 25.5% of Enhanced applications were referred to PSNI during 2022/23. Referrals are made to PSNI where the applicant:-

- has been matched to a criminal record;
- has been matched to information on a police database;
- is undertaking work at their home; or
- lives or has lived in the Republic of Ireland within the last 5 years.

23. On referral of an application, PSNI determines if additional / non-conviction information should be disclosed on the applicant's AccessNI certificate using a statutory test defined within legislation. Referrals are made to police forces in Great Britain also.

Table 4 – Police Referrals for 2022/23

	PSNI	GB forces
Number of Enhanced applications referred	32,613	5,789
Number of disclosures made	253	5

Commentary

24. 2022/23 saw a significant increase in the volume of disclosure applications submitted and processed by AccessNI, resulting in the busiest year ever in the Branch. The notable uplift was with regards to Enhanced checks with 129,000 applications being submitted, an increase of 11% on the previous year.

25. AccessNI believes that three primary factors contribute to the uplift in demand, namely:-

- Organisations continuing to adjust their recruitment position as they re-organise and re-commence activities following the Covid pandemic lockdowns.

- Organisations reviewing their safeguarding policies, with many seeking to include a rolling 3-5 year re-checking procedure for their staff / volunteers.
- General awareness of the role of AccessNI is now well-established throughout Northern Ireland, leading to an increased interest in the services being provided.

26. AccessNI has recruited additional staff to ensure that standards for turnaround of checks are maintained at a high level.

27. During the year, AccessNI worked closely with colleagues in The Executive Office to ensure that disclosure applications for host households under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme were processed as quickly as possible. AccessNI also created a new ‘prescribed purpose’ within the Criminal Records Disclosure Regulations to ensure that hosts under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme were eligible for Enhanced checks. In the 12 month period ending 31 March 2023, AccessNI processed 1,467 Enhanced checks under this Scheme.

28. AccessNI will continue to monitor the demand for disclosure checks and adjust the resources required to sustain high standards throughout 2023/24.

29. AccessNI’s top 30 customers in 2022/23 requested 71,137 applications (40% of all applications made). The top 5 customers are set out below (along with their comparative demand for 2021/22):-

Table 5 – Top 5 Registered Bodies

Organisation	Applications (2022/23)	Applications (2021/22)
Education Authority	12,091	11,988
BSO Recruitment	5,462	5,918
Ulster GAA	5,434	5,479
Security Industry Authority	3,379	3,947
Irish Football Association	2,887	1,970

Section 3 – Customer service standards

30. AccessNI service standards, set by the Minister of Justice, are to issue:

- 99% of Basic checks made via Responsible Bodies within 7 days
- 95% of Basic checks submitted directly by a member of the public within 14 days
- 99% of Standard checks within 7 days
- 70% of Enhanced checks within 10 days;
- 95% of Enhanced checks within 21 days; and
- 98% of Enhanced within 28 days

Table 6 – Service Standard Results (April 2022 - March 2023)

Type	Target	Achievement	Met
Basic check submitted via body	99% within 7 days	100%	✓
Basic check submitted directly by public	95% within 14 days	99.5%	✓
Standard check	99% within 7 days	99.8%	✓
Enhanced check	70% within 10 days	86.3%	✓
	95% within 21days	96.7%	✓
	98% within 28 days	97.8%	✗

31. Table 7 shows the average number of days to issue each type of disclosure check, along with a comparison with the two most recent previous years.

Table 7 - Average Issue Time (calendar days)

Type	Apr 2020- Mar 2021	Apr 2021 - Mar 2022	Apr 2022- Mar 2023
Basic check via RB	0.5	0.8	0.8
Basic check by citizen	2.1	2.0	2.2
Standard check	0.7	0.8	0.8
Enhanced check	2.8	3.6	4.6

Commentary

32. As can be seen from Tables 6 and 7 above, AccessNI’s performance has been strong in processing disclosure applications submitted during 2022/23. AccessNI was able to meet all but the final Ministerial target, ie 98% of Enhanced checks within 28 days, with 97.8% achieved. The reason for this relates directly to the significant and unanticipated increase in demand for Enhanced checks throughout the year, and the requirement for c25.5% of these to be referred to PSNI. The increase in volume of cases referred to PSNI, which exceeded 32,600 (the estimated in-year planning assumption was 27,400) had an adverse impact on PSNI’s ability to maintain turnaround within service targets, which in-turn impacted on AccessNI delivery against this specific target.

33. The average time to issue a certificate remained relatively consistent over the past 3 years in respect of Basic and Standard certificates, with only a slight noted increase in the number of days for an Enhanced check (although still significantly less than the pre-pandemic position).

34. The following graphs below provide further information about the processing of applications throughout the year.

Figure 1 – Average certificate issue time (days) 2022/23

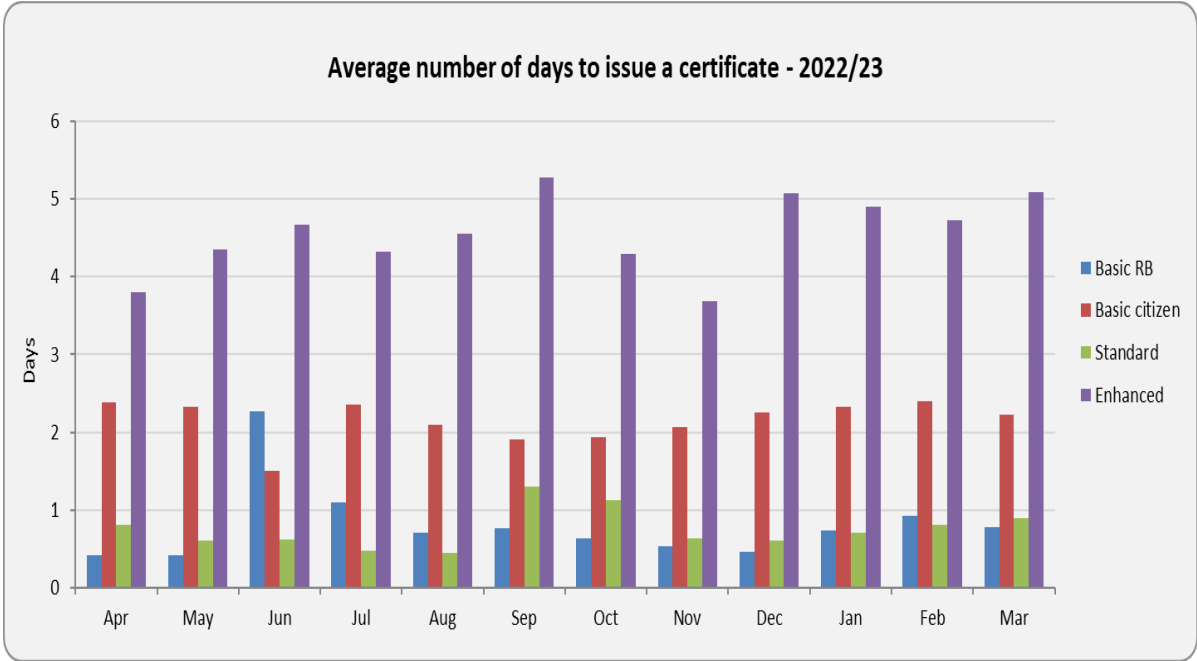


Figure 2 – Issue of Basic certificates 2022/23

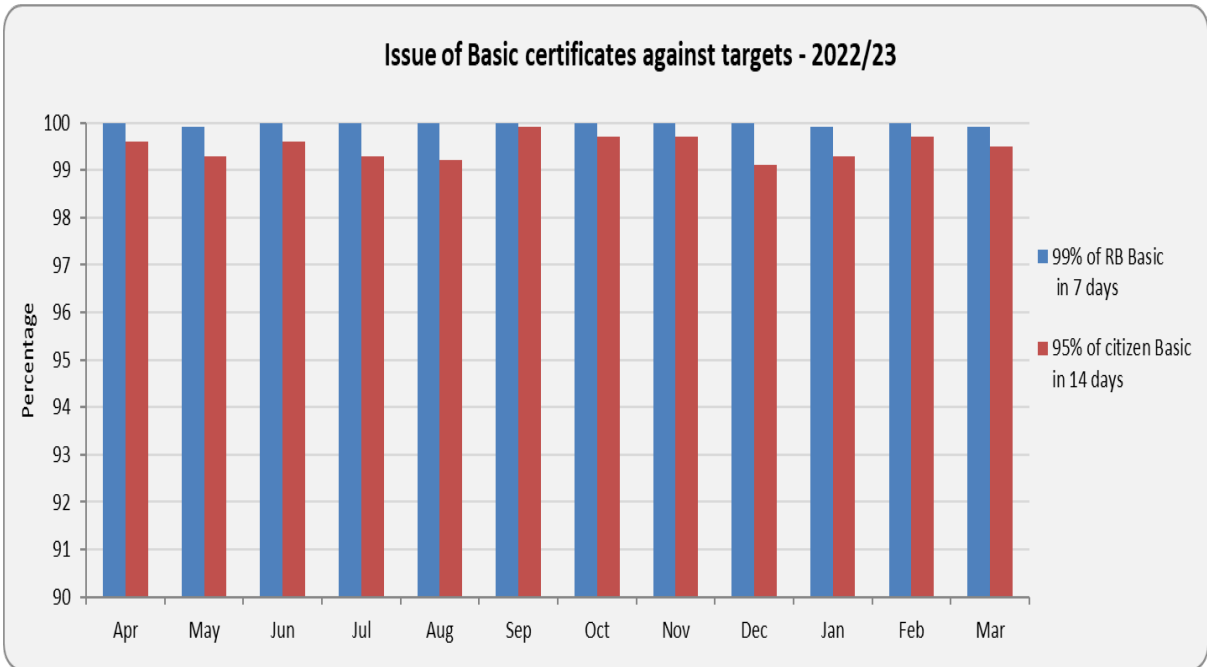


Figure 3 – Issue of Standard certificates 2022/23

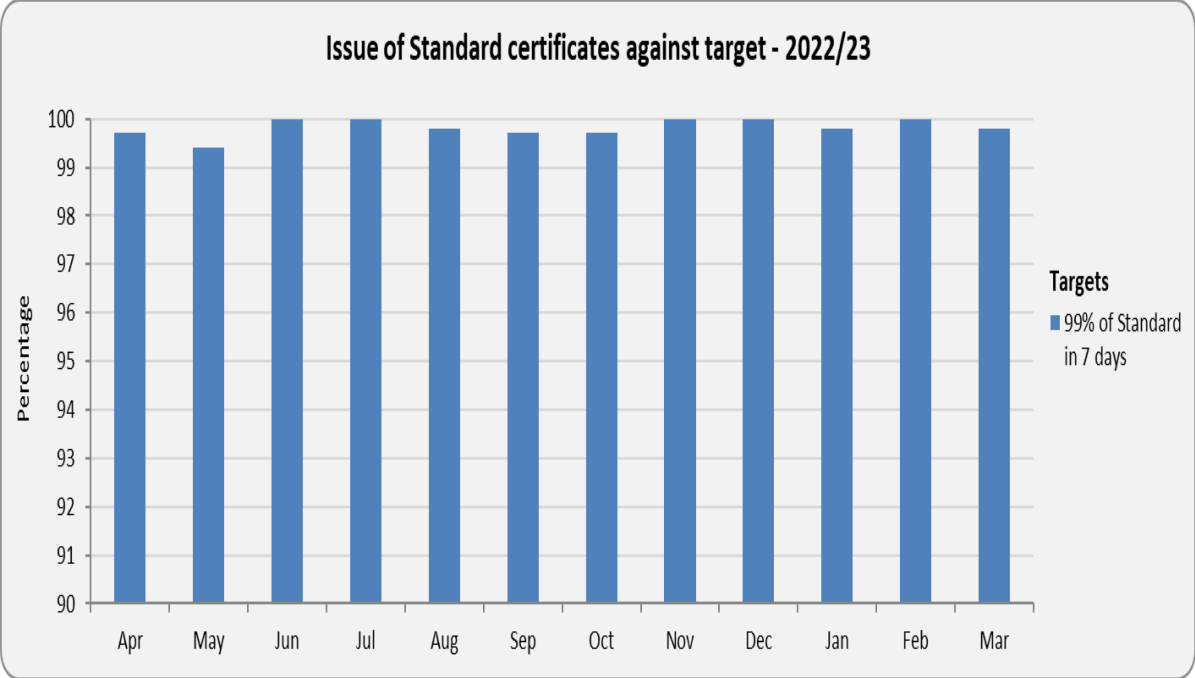
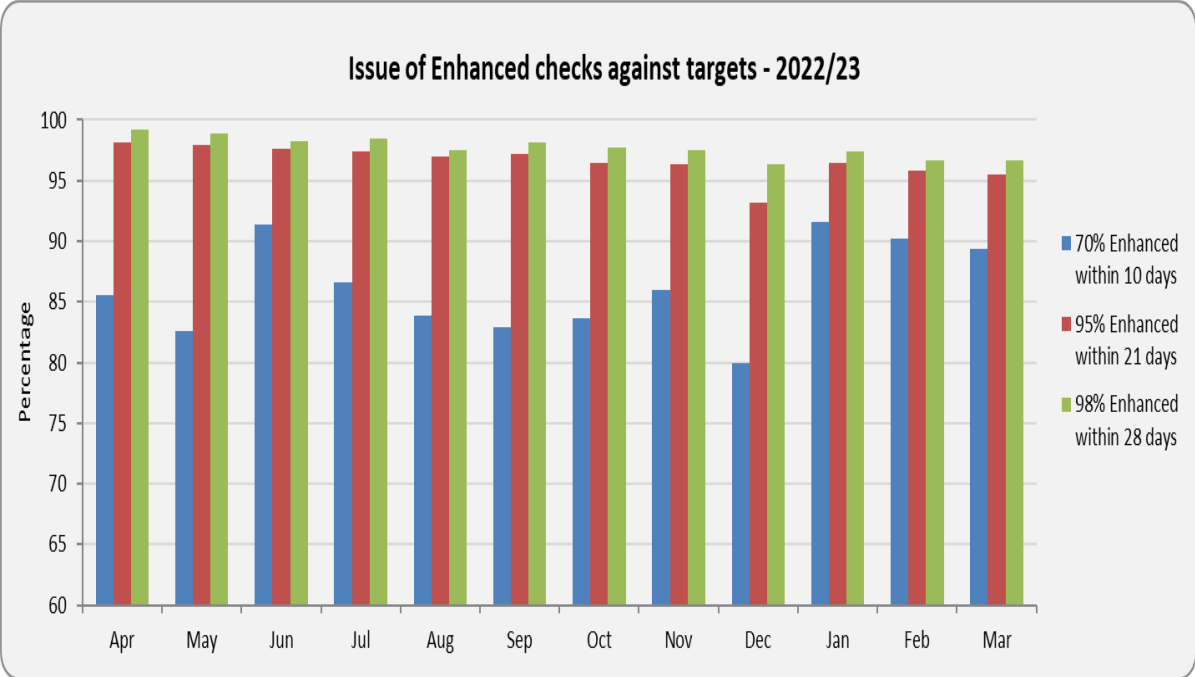


Figure 4 – Issue of Enhanced certificates 2022/23



Section 4 – Information disclosed on certificates

35. The table below sets out the total number of certificates processed in 2022/23, along with the number on which information was disclosed from various sources searched.

Table 8 – Disclosures of information on certificates

Type	Certificates processed	PNC	PSNI	GB forces	UK lists
Basic	42,083	1,088 2.6%	N/a	N/a	N/a
Standard	4,577	633 13.8%	N/a	N/a	N/a
Enhanced	127,653	5,578 4.4%	253 ¹	5 ¹	10

Glossary of Terms

PNC	Police National Computer – UK criminal records information disclosed
PSNI	Non-conviction information released by PSNI and provided on enhanced checks
GB forces	Non-conviction information released by GB police forces and provided on enhanced checks.
UK lists	Matches against lists held by Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) & Scottish Government lists of those barred from working with vulnerable groups.

¹ Police information may have been included in certificates that also have criminal record information disclosed, that is in the PNC column.

Filtering

36. AccessNI filters old and minor convictions from Standard and Enhanced certificates, before they are issued, in line with legislative provisions. The following table sets out the impact the Filtering Scheme had on disclosure certificates issued in 2022/23.

Table 9 – Impact of filtering

Type	Certs with information filtered	Certs with convictions filtered	Certs with cautions filtered	Certs with both filtered
Standard	500	361	104	35
Enhanced	5,308	3,281	1,750	277
Total	5,808	3,642	1,854	312

37. In June 2021, legislation was passed in the NI Assembly to amend the Filtering Scheme, effectively dropping the automatic ‘multiple convictions’ rule. This means that all convictions will be considered for filtering after a period of 11 years has elapsed since the date of conviction, unless:-

- The offence was a serious or ‘specified’ offence; or
- The offence resulted in a period of imprisonment.

38. Pending relevant legislative changes, AccessNI continues to refer to the Independent Reviewer of Criminal Record Certificates all Standard and Enhanced cases containing non-court disposals (NCDs) awarded when the applicant was under 18 years of age. The Independent Reviewer will consider each NCD and decides whether to retain the information, or remove it, before the certificate is issued.

39. During 2022/23 information was filtered from approximately 4.5% of Standard and Enhanced applications. However, AccessNI consider this has not adversely impacted the safeguarding of vulnerable groups as serious offences, including those with a sentence of imprisonment, are always disclosed.

Independent Reviewer of Criminal Record Certificates

40. The criminal record review scheme enables an Independent Reviewer to examine cases where:-

- Prior to issue, all the information on a certificate relates to a time when the individual was under 18 (Auto-referral); and
- After the issue of a certificate, where an individual requests a review on the basis that it was disproportionate for that information to have been released (Review request).

41. The table below sets out the extent and outcome of the Independent Reviewer's work in 2022/23.

Table 10 – Work of Independent Reviewer – 2022/23

Type	Referred/Received	Information removed	Information retained
Auto-referral	564	542	22
Review request	158	149	9
Total	722	691	31

Commentary

42. Table 8 highlights that the percentage of Basic certificates containing information was low (2.6%) as only unspent convictions (and no non-court disposals) are disclosed on such certificates. There was a significant percentage of certificates where information was found (in excess of 15%), but not disclosed due to the application of provisions within the Rehabilitation of Offenders (NI) Order 1978.

43. For Standard certificates, over 1 in 4 applicants were matched to information held on PNC. However, not all of the information was disclosed (for example impending prosecutions). After the application of the filtering process and where the Independent Reviewer removed information, the

percentage of certificates where criminal record information was disclosed was 13.8%.

44. Of the applications made for Enhanced certificates, c10.6% were matched to information held on PNC or had police information disclosed. As with Standard checks, and due to filtering, not all the information was disclosed – therefore, the number of checks where information was disclosed reduced to 5,846 (4.6%). Of these checks, 268 (0.2%) contained information from police or a notification that an applicant was on the barred list.

45. Ten persons who applied for an Enhanced check were found to be on one of the UK lists of those barred from working with children or vulnerable adults. In seven of these cases applicants were unaware of their barring status at the time of their application. The other three cases have been referred to the Public Prosecution Service.

46. In October 2022 an applicant received a conviction for *Possession of a False Identity Document with Intent x 2* and *Forgery x 2* as they had altered an AccessNI Enhanced Disclosure Certificate. Two other cases were referred to PSNI for investigation of fraud where the applicants had not provided details of all names used on their application (and where the omitted names were the names against which criminality information was held).

47. Table 10 shows that the majority (96%) of information considered by the Independent Reviewer was removed from Standard / Enhanced certificates after that review, and before the certificate was issued.

Section 5 – EU referrals

48. During 2022/23, AccessNI continued its project with the UK’s central authority for the exchange of criminal records (ACRO), to obtain information from approved European Union member states where Enhanced checks were sought for EU nationals who were seeking to work with children in Northern Ireland. The project continued after Brexit following an agreement between the UK Government and the EU to replace the EU directive under which the information could be obtained prior to Brexit.

49. AccessNI has arrangements in place to make referrals to 15 EU countries, although Bulgaria was temporarily suspended from this process in February due to internal processing difficulties with authorities in that jurisdiction. Details of the volume of referrals during 2022/23 are provided in the table below.

Table 11 - EU referrals in 2022/23

Country	Referrals	Country	Referrals	Country	Referrals
Bulgaria	42	Holland	27	Poland	560
Cz Republic	22	Hungary	65	Portugal	149
France	70	Italy	96	Romania	212
Greece	24	Latvia	79	Slovakia	60
Germany	71	Lithuania	200	Spain	109

50. A total of 1,786 referrals were made to these EU member states in 2022/23. From these referrals a total of 16 matches were made to criminal records held in the EU member states and nine disclosures were made on Enhanced certificates.

51. In addition to above, 2,157 Enhanced checks were referred to An Garda Síochána as the applicant lives in the Republic of Ireland, or has lived there in the last 5 years. Of these, disclosure of criminal record information was made on six Enhanced certificates.

Section 6 – Disputes of criminal record information

52. AccessNI deals with substantive disputes where the applicant questions the conviction or other information provided on the certificate. The figures below refer solely to occasions where AccessNI staff make an error, for example, selecting a criminal record that does not belong to the applicant. It does not include those instances where the criminal record is inaccurate.


53. The table below sets out the number of disputes upheld compared to the previous year.

Table 12 – Disputes upheld

	Total Upheld 2021/22	Total Upheld 2022/23
Substantive	8	7

54. Table 13 sets out achievement against the target for the number of substantive disputes upheld:-

Table 13 – Achievement for substantive disputes

	Target	Achieved	Met
Substantive	No less than 1 certificate in every 11,000 certificates issued to have an error	1 certificate in every 24,901 certificates contained an error	

Section 7 – Income and expenditure

55. AccessNI operates a full cost recovery model requiring the income derived from the fees collected for disclosure applications to offset AccessNI expenditure each year. Table 14 sets out the difference between income from fees charged and expenditure on staff and non-staff costs together with notional costs in 2022/23, and compares this with the previous two years.

Table 14 – AccessNI cost recovery position

	Apr 2020- Mar 2021 (£000s)	Apr 2021- Mar 2022 (£000s)	Apr 2022- Mar 2023 (£000s)	% change for 22/23 against 21/22
Expenditure ²	3,026	3,130	3,018	-3.6%
Income	3,049	3,831	4,024	+5.1%
CR Out-turn	23	701	1,006	

Commentary

56. In 2022/23, AccessNI's costs decreased by 3.6% due primarily a cessation in the costs incurred in the previous year to exit the previous IT support contract. These cost reductions were slightly offset by increased salary and variable costs directly linked to the uplift in demand for disclosure applications.

57. In the same period, AccessNI's income increased by 5.1%, due to the increase in the volume of Enhanced applications received in the year. As a result, AccessNI's cost recovery surplus in 2022/23 was £1.006m.

58. AccessNI continues to monitor the nature of this increase in demand for disclosures to understand if this is a short-term 'adjustment' following the pandemic, or if this is likely to be a sustained new 'normal' going forward.

² Expenditure costs include costs of depreciation and notional running costs

Section 8 – Compliance work with organisations

59. AccessNI has a network of Registered Bodies that countersign applications for Standard and Enhanced certificates in accordance with Part V of the Police Act 1997 and a number of Responsible Bodies that countersign applications for Basic certificates on the basis of a Service Level Agreement with AccessNI. At 31 March 2023, 798 organisations in Northern Ireland, and wider afield, were registered with AccessNI.

60. All organisations are bound by a statutory Code of Practice that sets out their obligations as part of registration with AccessNI. AccessNI has a number of measures in place to ensure compliance with the Code including a rolling programme of audits with organisations to test their level of compliance. The table below sets out information about AccessNI's compliance work during 2022/23.

Table 15 – Compliance visits

	Audit 22/23	De- Registrations	Audits 21/22	De- Registrations
Registered Body	178	1	148	0

Commentary

61. During 2022/23, compliance audits continued to be undertaken virtually, however, due to staffing pressures within the team, it was not possible to maintain audits at the target level of 25 per month. New staff, who joined the team last year, are now fully trained and the number of audits completed has increased accordingly. Having consulted with the AccessNI Stakeholder Forum, it is acknowledged that the virtual nature of the audits is working very well and also serves to keep costs down. As such, AccessNI has no plans to re-introduce physical visits, but retains this option should the need arise.

62. AccessNI runs a routine training programme aimed at registered signatories to assist them in:-

- processing applications;
- using the AccessNI online services;
- complying with the Code of Practice; and
- understanding criminality information and interpreting disclosure certificates.

63. These sessions prove useful for both existing signatories that wish to refresh their knowledge of AccessNI processes and procedures, and for new signatories. Throughout 2022/23, training sessions were all conducted virtually, with a total of 24 events successfully held, attended by approximately 1,233 persons. Feedback from these events remains positive with attendees generally appreciative of the guidance messages and support provided.

64. AccessNI continues to publish seasonal Newsletters. These are issued electronically to all approved signatories and provide a range of information and advice on eligibility for, and use of, AccessNI disclosure services.

Section 9 – AccessNI Business Solution

65. During 2022/23, AccessNI has made a number of important changes to its IT system. Since 2015, support for the IT system had been provided through the NI Civil Service’s Strategic Development Partnership contract. This contract ended in October 2022 and AccessNI made a number of changes in preparation for this.

66. One of these changes was for AccessNI to transition to a new payment provider for those citizens applying directly for Basic checks; AccessNI migrated to WorldPay in October 2022.

67. AccessNI also held workshops with operational staff and members of our Stakeholder Forum to look at potential enhancements to the IT business solution (ANIDS). Changes were implemented in October to both the citizen and administration portals, with a number of further enhancements currently sitting with our 3rd party support provider to impact assess proposals and help inform prioritisation of the change process.

68. AccessNI continues to work with the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) to progress a longstanding objective to link to its Update Service. DBS is currently reviewing the Update Service to assess the extent to which it meets customer and business needs. AccessNI is working closely with DBS to ensure that system modifications can be effected at the earliest opportunity in order that the ‘improved’ Update Service will be available to AccessNI customers, thereby providing a degree of portability for disclosure checks.

69. AccessNI will endeavour to keep Registered Bodies apprised of significant milestones as this review progresses.