4800-011
Essential Skills Northern Ireland Communication Level 1

Chief Examiner's report – June 2026

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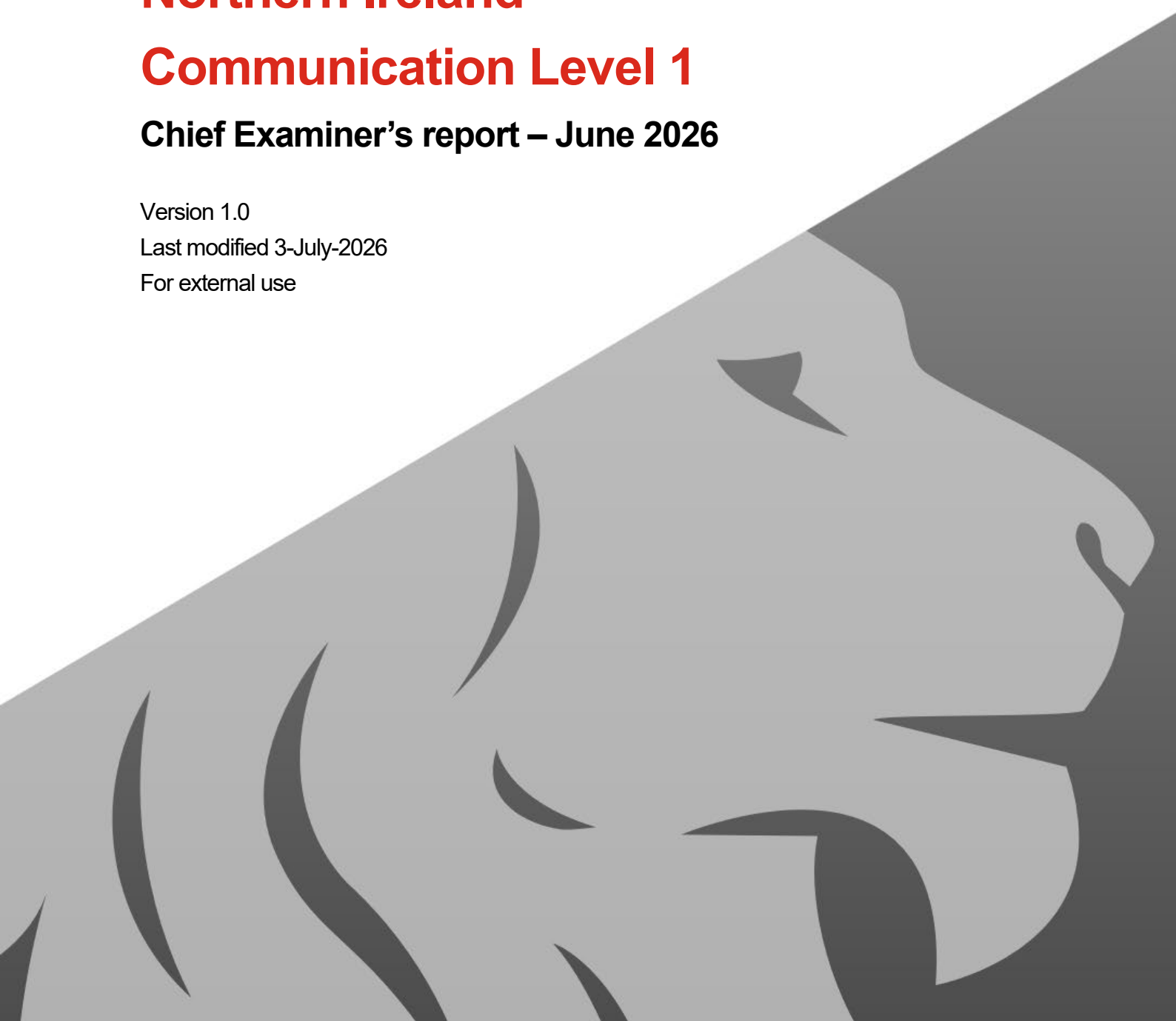

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide centres with feedback on the performance of candidates for 4800-011 Essential Skills Northern Ireland Communication Level 1.

2. Overall Performance

This report covers the period from November 2025 to April 2026.

Candidate pass rates continue to be high, with most candidates showing good preparation and an understanding of source documents and questions. For lower-scoring candidates, there are some common areas for which extra learning and preparation would be beneficial. These include:

In the reading section:

1. Reading each question carefully and considering exactly what is being asked
2. Reading source documents carefully
3. Distinguishing between main points and details in texts
4. Accurately identifying layout features
5. Identifying suitable responses to texts.

In the writing section:

1. Spelling, punctuation and grammar
2. Language
3. Fully addressing the task and covering all the listed detail
4. Format and structure, including paragraphing and writing in a logical order with a clear beginning, middle and end.

2.1. Areas of good performance

Overall:

Successful candidates attempted most or all of the questions on the paper, maintaining performance across the reading section and both writing tasks.

In the reading section:

Successful candidates were able to accumulate marks across all the assessment criteria (a-d). In particular, they were able to find detailed information in the source documents, and they could identify layout features used to direct the reader to particular points. Strong candidates could also identify the main points of a text, understanding the difference between these and specific details.

Successful candidates paid attention to the number of responses required, which is always stated clearly in each question. They were able to read source documents fully and carefully, finding answers spread through the whole document as well as in specific paragraphs or sections.

Crucially, successful candidates read questions carefully in order to give accurate answers.

In the writing section:

Many candidates performed well in the writing section, showing very good preparation and practice. Strengths were shown particularly in the composition of responses, including writing in a clear and coherent style, maintaining a logical order, covering all the required detail, and meeting the task set. Successful candidates were generally able to format and structure their answers correctly, understanding the requirements for letters, emails, speeches and articles.

Strong candidates showed a good understanding of language and tone, using a style and level of formality that was appropriate for the task set.

Successful candidates were usually able to perform well in at least two areas of spelling, punctuation and grammar. Most were able to punctuate the beginnings and ends of sentences correctly. Where more complex words were included in the question brief, these were spelled correctly.

Successful candidates showed good time management skills by answering both questions in full and leaving some time at the end for checking and correcting errors.

2.2. Areas for development

Overall:

1. Checking and proofreading answers

Many successful candidates continued to show evidence of checking and correcting errors, such as adding more information to responses in the reading section, crossing out and correcting spelling errors in the writing section, or indicating where a new paragraph should begin. Extra marks were often picked up in these ways, so encouraging this practice in the time remaining at the end of the exam would be of significant benefit to all candidates. In the case of some borderline but unsuccessful candidates, an extra two or three marks gained in this way would mean the difference between a pass and a fail.

In the reading section:

1. Reading questions carefully

It is very important that candidates take the time to read questions carefully. Skimming a question, or spotting certain key words and rushing to answer, can lead to misunderstanding questions and giving incorrect answers. It can also cause candidates to miss important information contained in the question.

Candidates should also be wary of answering the question they expect rather than the one that is actually being asked. Questions will not always be phrased the same way on different papers, or ask for the exact same things as similar questions in sample papers. Careful reading of and considering the question should help to prevent this issue.

Candidates might find it helpful to practise reading questions and looking for the following key information:

- **What** the question is asking **about**, eg the whole document, or a particular topic or argument within the document.
- **What** the question is asking **for**, eg reasons, items, places, names, layout features, main points, etc
- The **number of responses** required, which is always stated clearly in the question, eg Give three ways that…
- **Which source document** they should be looking at.

Some candidates may find it useful to underline or circle important instructions in the question before attempting an answer. Not only does this encourage the candidate to consider the question carefully before answering, but it also may help with checking.

2. Reading source documents carefully

Most candidates seemed to engage well with and understand the source documents, and they could locate information within them. However, there were still some who did not find information in all areas of the provided source documents, such as in text boxes, headings, links and lists, or in multiple paragraphs or sections. Answers to one question are not always contained within one specific area of the document but may be spread through the whole text. There were also some candidates who appeared to skim-read the source documents and missed specific details within them.

Source documents may contain a lot of different information and ideas, including main points, specific details, opinions, facts, arguments, personal stories and experiences, contact details, instructions, advice, and more. Candidates need to read and consider these carefully when answering questions to make sure they provide accurate answers. It is therefore important for candidates to practise reading many different types of texts and to become familiar with the different ways in which information is presented.

3. Distinguishing between main points and details in texts

While most candidates were able to identify the main points of a source document, there were some who found this more challenging. These candidates tended to list specific details instead, such as points that were only mentioned once in the text, or to copy out large parts of the text rather than look for the main points. Candidates might find it helpful to practise identifying the main points in different kinds of documents, looking for the topics that are included in subheadings and titles, or discussed at length in the text.

There were also a few candidates who answered questions asking for main points with layout features. Careful reading of the question is important to avoid this issue.

4. Accurately identifying layout features

Most candidates were clearly well prepared to answer questions about layout features. However, some did not read the question itself carefully enough. Candidates will usually be asked to identify layout features that fulfil a particular purpose, such as helping readers locate specific information, highlighting main points, or helping readers understand a text or a part of a text. If candidates answer with layout features that are in the document but that do not fulfil that purpose, they cannot gain marks, as they have not properly answered the question. Common layout features such as title, paragraphs and bullet points will not always be accurate answers. As always, careful reading of the question is key!

5. Identifying suitable responses to texts (criterion d)

There has been an improvement in candidates' ability to answer questions addressing this criterion, showing good preparation and practise. However, there were still some candidates who did not identify actions that could or should be taken in response to a text, such as following instructions or finding links and contact information. Candidates may find it useful to look at different types of documents to become familiar with the ways that further action may be suggested.

In the writing section:

1. Punctuation

Candidates still tended to struggle with punctuation the most out of spelling, punctuation and grammar. While most candidates were able to punctuate the beginnings and ends of sentences correctly, there were still some candidates who found this difficult, placing full stops where they were not needed or using commas in place of full stops (comma splices). There were a few answers in which full stops were completely omitted, which also impacted the overall clarity and coherence.

Correct use of capital letters for proper nouns was another area some candidates found challenging, especially in addresses. Use of lowercase 'i' when candidates referred to themselves was another common error.

A very small number of candidates wrote their entire answer in capital letters, therefore losing a significant number of punctuation marks.

Although handwriting is not assessed, legibility did have an impact in cases where it was impossible to distinguish between uppercase and lowercase letters (most commonly S and C), or to distinguish between a full stop and a comma. While benefit of the doubt is applied where possible, poorly formed letters may lead to unintended errors.

Candidates must remember that correct punctuation (as well as spelling and grammar) is required in all responses, including speeches and emails to friends.

2. Spelling and grammar

Common errors continued to be seen, including 'alot', 'writting', 'aswell', 'collage' instead of 'college', using 'of' instead of 'have' (could of, would of, etc), and 'yous'/'you'se'/'use' instead of 'you'. Common homophone errors were also seen often, including here/hear, there/they're/their, to/too/two, were/where, etc. Learning and preparation should cover these common issues in order to help candidates avoid building up errors that can lead to a significant loss of marks.

Amongst some candidates, the use of articles ‘a’, ‘an’ and ‘the’ posed a particular challenge. Other candidates struggled more with subject-verb agreement, and some found maintaining a consistent tense to be particularly challenging. Encouraging candidates to practise the areas they find particularly difficult and look out for these while checking their answers is recommended.

3. Language

Correct and appropriate use of language was a challenge for some candidates. Common issues included incorrect word choice, using an inappropriate tone or level of formality, clumsy wording, unnecessary repetition of words like ‘and’ or ‘also’, and misusing common words and expressions.

As at least one of the writing tasks requires a formal response, candidates should be familiar with formal language and how it is used in different contexts. For example, a formal letter or email should begin with something like ‘Dear Mrs. (Name)’ or ‘Dear Sir/Madam’ and not ‘Hi Jane’.

Candidates should remember that ‘textspeak’ should not be used in the exam and is not considered appropriate for any of the tasks the candidate will be asked to complete.

4. Relevant detail and on-topic responses

Most candidates were able to cover all the required detail in their responses and give enough information to meet the task set. However, there were still some who did not cover all the details listed in the task, or who left out vital information such as dates, names and contact details where they were needed. Each writing task presents the details that need to be covered in a bullet pointed list. Candidates should be aware that they need to address and expand on all of these.

Candidates should be aware that they do not have to include their own name, address, email or any other personal details in their response, but can include fake details instead, eg John Smith, Fake Street, Fake Town, FT6 1FT.

In rare cases, candidates wrote answers that were entirely off topic, ignoring the writing task set in the question. This led to a significant loss of marks on the content of their answers.

5. Format and structure

It is important candidates are familiar with the expected format and structure of:

- letters
- emails

- speeches
- articles.

It is encouraging to see so many candidates well prepared for these. Many showed a good understanding of correct formatting, as well as how to structure responses with a good beginning, middle and end. However, some common errors were still seen, including articles without titles, and letters and emails without closing salutations or a sender's name. Some candidates did still struggle to finish their responses properly with either a conclusion or a clear ending.

Paragraphing continued to be a challenge for many candidates, with issues including haphazard paragraph breaks, starting a new paragraph for every sentence, or omitting paragraph breaks completely.

6. Too short responses

Most candidates wrote responses of an appropriate length that met the requirements of the task successfully. However, there were still a small number of candidates who wrote finished answers that were too short, therefore not providing enough information to properly address the task or to demonstrate writing ability.

There are two writing questions on the paper, one worth 6 marks and one worth 9 marks. Candidates should aim to write 80-120 words on the 'short' question and 120-140 words on the 'long' question. Responses that are much too short are penalised across certain categories, as one or two sentences is not enough to demonstrate consistent ability in some areas. If candidates write extremely short responses that they believe have covered all the detail requirements of the question, they should be encouraged to expand on these points or to explain their arguments in more depth.

7. Only answering one of the writing questions

It was rare to see only one writing question attempted, but there were still occasional examples of this issue. Candidates who only answer one writing question cannot gain any marks on the unanswered question, and they are also penalised across spelling, punctuation and grammar. It is therefore extremely difficult to pass if only one writing question is attempted. Candidates should be advised that if they are running out of time, a brief summary or bullet point answer is preferable to no answer at all. This can mean the difference between a pass and a fail.

3. Recommendations and Advice for Centres

1. Candidates should not be entered for the exam before they are ready. Adequate learning and practice should take place first to ensure that candidates are able to meet the criteria and are prepared for the types of questions they may be asked. Utilising the sample papers and worked examples on the City & Guilds website is recommended as a way to assess whether a candidate is ready or would benefit from further learning. Candidates should be prepared to gain enough marks across **both** sections of the paper. Ability in reading only or writing only is not enough to pass.

2. Familiarity with the question types and the format of the exam is extremely important. Making use of the sample papers on the City & Guilds website is strongly recommended.

3. As the assessment contains both reading and writing sections and involves a substantial amount of reading of source documents and questions, practice and preparation should include time management techniques.

4. Candidates should be aware that in the reading section they do not need to answer in complete sentences or to repeat the stem of the question in their answer (although answers do need to be legible). This can help with managing time during the exam.

5. It is essential that candidates read all questions fully and consider what is being asked of them before attempting to answer. This may involve underlining important instructions on the question paper in both the reading and writing sections.

6. Many candidates would strongly benefit from checking their finished responses in both the reading and writing sections.

7. As part of the learning process, candidates should be exposed to all types of source documents, including websites, articles, formal letters and emails, leaflets, promotional material and advertising, amongst others. Any of these may be encountered as source documents in the reading section.

8. As part of the learning process, candidates should practise formatting and structuring specific types of documents correctly (letters, emails, speeches and articles), and should be aware of the type of language, tone and level of formality required for different situations, for example (but not limited to): job applications, writing to the council, writing to a friend, giving a speech to colleagues, and writing an article for a college magazine.