

Raising a Concern

Designated Officers' Forum

Minutes

Monday 22 September 2025 ~ online

In attendance: David Hughes (DoF, Chair), Andy McCaw (TEO), Jacqueline McLaughlin (DfE), Donal Moran (DfI), David Lennox (DoJ), Kevin Rogan (DfC), Carolyn Shaw (DE), Paul McElwee (DAERA), Stuart Stevenson (DoF/Treasury Officer of Accounts).

Apologies: Laura McPolin (Jacqueline McLaughlin deputizing); Colin Campbell (DAERA).

1. Welcome

- a. No conflicts of interest were declared.

2. Minutes of Last Meeting

- a. The Minutes of the last meeting were agreed and adopted.

ACTION: DH to post the Minutes online.

- b. Actions from previous meetings

Actions from last meeting

- i. remaining returns for the Annual Report to be provided to DH as soon as possible

Complete

- ii. DH to circulate complete table and surrounding text in draft –

Complete

- iii. DH to post revised RaCPF and issue intranet article across all Departments

Complete (22 May)

- iv. TMcC to advise on completion of the training offer and invite relevant colleagues

Ongoing

- v. DH to organise the next meeting

Complete

3. Annual Report – NICS Board Feedback

- 3.1. DH rehearsed the engagement with NICS Board members, where questions were asked about getting greater value from the annual report of the Designated Officers. In particular, they asked about whether the report could indicate where there turned out to be “cause for concern”, as a proportion of the cases that being raised.
- 3.2. It was recognised that individual Departments’ recording practices were informed by their specific circumstances. Departments generally record outcomes, but in different ways (concern upheld / not upheld / partially upheld; case transferred to HR / fraud team / other policy process; recommendations for specific and/or general change; *etc.*).
- 3.3. In addition, it was noted that when a case moved into an HR process to be handled as a grievance or Dignity at Work case, the Raising Concerns team would have no further information. And it was noted that some such cases could run for months or even years before a conclusion was reached.
- 3.4. There was discussion of whether the recording of concerns could be more akin to the recording of fraud, but it was noted that fraud had a clearer definition and clear categories.
- 3.5. It was agreed that the strategic objective of the Policy Framework was not to achieve standardization but to support cultural change around attitudes to the problems that are raised. The strategic interest of the Board would be in the assurance that concerns were recognised as such and addressed effectively. Efforts to require specific definitions, or to focus on the outcomes of cases, might detract from the effective operation of the arrangements at departmental level.
- 3.6. It was noted that Whistleblowing/Raising Concerns in UKG was treated as a matter of HR (and reported through the Civil Service People Group), and their report logged the number of cases where *wrongdoing* was found. This was quite different to the handling of concerns here, which focussed on matters of business going wrong. DH agree to circulate the latest UKG report for information.

ACTION: DH to circulate the UKG report on Whistleblowing

3.7. It was agreed that the Annual Report for 25/26 should be improved from the previous year, so that there was a degree of consistency in reporting which cases were accepted to be handled as concerns. This would include a clear distinction between those concerns relating to ALBs which were handled within Departments and those passed back to the ALB.

Action: DH to circulate a revised version of the commissioning note, for colleagues' consideration and comment.

Action: DH to arrange a one-agenda-item meeting of the Forum to discuss.

4. Communications

4.1. The Forum reported department-level communications. No system-wide communication was proposed at this stage.

5. Learning & Development

5.1. The forum agreed that the operational teams meeting was proving a valuable means of learning and development for those handling concerns.

ACTION: DH to schedule a further operational-teams meeting before the end of the calendar year.

6. AOB

NIAO Review of barriers to raising concerns

6.1. DH reported that the NIAO were hoping to publish early in the new year

NIPSO development of a Model Complaints Handling Procedure (MCHP) for Government bodies

6.2. DH reported that NIPSO had briefed Perm Secs. KR advised that colleagues in DoH had offered to provide support (the MCHP for the health sector was already embedded).

7. Date of next meeting

7.1. It was agreed to meet again as set out above to discuss reporting.

ACTION: DH to organise the next meeting.