Draft Minutes – DoF Departmental Board Meeting
15 April 2026

Attendees: Neil Gibson (Chair)
Paul Duffy
Sharon Gallagher
Paul Grocott
David Hughes
Joanne McBurney
Jill Minne
Gavin Patrick (Items 1-7, 12-21 only)
Catherine Shannon
Tony Simpson
Sharon Smyth
Joanne Timoney
Philip Wales
Suzanne McLaughlin (Item 8 only)
Tracy Flanaghan (Item 8 only)
Deborah Brown (Department of Justice – Observer)
Colin Woods (Department for Infrastructure – Observer)
Olwen Laird (NEBM)
Joan McEwan (NEBM)
Roger Walker - Secretariat

Apologies: Ciarrai Conlan
Louise Crilly
Tracey McCavigan

Location: Second Floor Conference Room, Clare House

1. Welcome and Declarations of Interest

1.1 Neil Gibson welcomed the members to the meeting. He noted that this was Paul Grocott's first meeting as a Board Member and that Deborah Brown and Colin Woods were attending as observers prior to joining the Department on 1 June. He noted apologies from Ciarrai Conlan, Louise Crilly (Joanne Timoney deputising) and Tracey McCavigan.

1.2 The members confirmed there were no conflicts of interest.

2. Chairman's Remarks

2.1 Neil updated the members on current issues. He outlined concerns arising from the lack of an agreed multi-year budget and its potential implications for earmarked and non-earmarked expenditure on DoF programmes and projects as well as for the NICS pay award. He confirmed that should the NI Executive remain unable to agree a budget he may be required to make budgetary decisions in his capacity as DoF Accounting Officer.

2.2 Neil noted that budgetary pressures are likely to necessitate cost-cutting measures regardless of the final budget outcome, particularly in years two and three of a multi-year settlement. He emphasised that further consideration will be required on how such measures should be implemented and that he was considering convening a special Board meeting. He also confirmed his availability for individual discussions with Board Members.

2.3 He thanked the members for completing the questionnaire on his leadership and for their support.

2.4 He confirmed Paul Duffy as Default Deputy Chair in his absence should the need arise.

2.5 Neil noted that this was the final Board Meeting for Sharon Smyth and Joanne McBurney and formally thanked them for their contributions and service. The members wished them well in their new posts.

3 Apologies, Minutes and Action Points

3.1 The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

3.2 Neil noted that all actions were now closed with the exception of the following, and noted the progress:

- DB Meeting 18/09/24, Action 4 - Consideration to be given to holding dedicated Board to discuss 3/5-year planning (Gavin Patrick) – Initial indicative 2026 / 2027 budget positions have been provided to business areas however further engagement is dependent on finalisation of the budget.
- DB Meeting 03/12/25, Action 4 – Olwen Laird to contact Frank Kirkland, Chair of the NEDs Forum, to arrange presentation by Joanne McBurney to raise awareness of current NI budget performance (Joanne McBurney) – Contact remains ongoing.
- DB Meeting 03/12/25, Action 9 – Neil Gibson to consider and discuss a possible departmental model for legislation process with David Hughes – a meeting is scheduled to take place.
- DB Meeting 04/02/26, Action 7 - Gavin Patrick to refine format of DoF Corporate Risk Register – Gavin has advised that updates have been made to the Risk Register and a further refresh will take place for the 2026/27 year.
- DB Meeting 04/02/26, Action 8 - Members to ensure governance returns to DoF Corporate Governance are filed within the timeframe and with sufficient narrative detail to effectively reflect current status – Monitoring continuing.

- DB Meeting 04/02/26, Action 11 - Sharon Smyth to share a copy of the Premises Guide with the members – Sharon confirmed at the April DB meeting that the guide for DoF is still in draft. She will collaborate with Sharon Gallagher, Philip Wales, Paul Duffy, Paul Grocott and David Hughes to finalise.

ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

4 Finance Update

4.1 Gavin Patrick gave the Finance Update. He outlined the latest capital and resource forecasts, noting that the figure for resource was likely to increase.

4.2 He confirmed that one-to-one meetings had been held with Board Members and reiterated the importance of early escalation of budgetary pressures and easements to Finance Business Partners.

4.3 The members expressed appreciation for the support provided by Finance Business Partners. Neil endorsed this and added his thanks to the Directors for their hard work and to Stuart Stevenson's team in PSG for management of the NI Block.

4.4 The members noted the Finance Update.

Governance, Audit and Risk

5 DoF Business Plan – Performance v Targets 2025 / 2026

5.1 Gavin updated the members on the progress against targets on the DoF Business Plan 2025 / 2026. Olwen Laird noted that 87% of targets have either been completed or are anticipated to be achieved within the timeframe and highlighted that it reflected a huge amount of delivery by DoF over the year. David Hughes observed that the new mandate will offer opportunities to re-examine the Department's strategic objectives.

5.2 The members noted the progress made against the targets on the DoF Business Plan 2025 / 2026.

6 DoF Corporate Risk Register 2025 / 2026 – Position at 31 March 2026

6.1 Gavin presented the DoF Corporate Risk Register 2025 / 2026 position as at 31 March 2026 showing the risks both to the Department and to the wider NICS. He confirmed there had been no changes in the current position since the previous update.

6.2 Paul Grocott asked whether the Board has considered risk appetites. Gavin confirmed that this would be considered in a forthcoming paper to DARC and at a future Departmental Board meeting.

6.3 Neil encouraged the new Board members to provide feedback to Gavin on the Risk Register to provide new insight. Deborah Brown noted that whilst it is reassuring that the Department scrutinises shared service risks so deeply it is also important that reassurance is sought from other departments that they are in turn taking action to ensure minimal risk exposure to DoF. Neil confirmed that consideration is being given about how best to collate assurance from other departments and on finalising the reporting format.

6.4 The members noted the update on the DoF Corporate Risk Register 2025 / 2026 at 31 March 2026.

7 Cyber Risk

7.1 Paul Grocott gave the Cyber Security Update and reported that there had been an increase in cyber-attack attempts on the NICS network but that mitigating controls have remained effective.

7.1 The members considered the position around awareness and training. Paul Grocott noted that the Department has concluded a GovAssure Lite assessment on its 44 systems and that findings on awareness and risk management were being reviewed.

7.2 Paul Grocott reported on the outcome of the February phishing exercise. Olwen asked for a comparison with other departments.

Action: Paul Grocott to provide a comparative breakdown of the February Phishing exercise results across departments

7.3 Paul Grocott outlined recent activity to train staff on effective cyber security precautions and to increase awareness. Deborah noted the need for greater consistency in cyber-security training across the NICS, recognising differences in departmental risk appetites. Joan McEwan proposed to raise this issue with other DARCs.

Action: Joan McEwan to raise the issue of consistent cyber-training with other DARCs

7.4 The members noted the Cyber Risk update and the mitigating actions being taken.

Gavin Patrick left, and Suzanne McLaughlin and Tracy Flanagan joined, the meeting.

8 Overview of the first year of the Strategic Asset Management Unit (SAMU) as a new Shared Service

8.1 Suzanne McLaughlin and Tracy Flanagan joined Sharon Gallagher to provide an update on SAMU's first year, including a demonstration of the Government Land & Property Asset Viewer and progress against Year 1 targets.

8.2 Neil noted the positive feedback from the NICS Board for SAMU and Joan described it as an exemplar compared with similar work elsewhere.

8.3 The members discussed challenges in securing consistent engagement from all departments. Neil noted that SAMU is relevant to HOCS' fiscal responsibility priorities. Deborah expressed her appreciation for SAMU's benefits to her current Department of Justice role. Joan noted the potential value of giving the SAMU presentation to the NEDs Forum to secure cross-departmental support.

8.4 The members noted the presentation on the progress of SAMU.

Suzanne and Tracy left the meeting.

ITEMS FOR DECISION

9 DoF Business Plan 2026 / 2027

9.1 David Hughes presented the draft DoF Business Plan for 2026 / 2027 and thanked the members for their contributions. He provided a timeline for next steps, including drafts for the Minister and Permanent Secretary's Forewords and the production of a designed version for submission to the Minister for agreement prior to publication.

9.2 Sharon Gallagher noted that she had reconsidered her contribution and would provide new actions to David to more accurately reflect LPS commitments around SAMU and rating policy.

Action: Sharon Gallagher to submit new actions to David Hughes around SAMU and rating policy

9.3 Jill will provide updated wording for action 2.1 to refer to workforce renewal.

Action: Jill Minne to provide updated wording for action 2.1 to refer to workforce renewal

9.4 Olwen queried whether there had been an assessment completed on DoF's progress against targets across the entire mandate.

Action: Gavin Patrick to advise on DoF's performance against targets over the course of the entire mandate

9.5 Joan asked David for an update on the DoF Equality Action Plan.

Action: David Hughes to provide an update to Joan McEwan on the DoF Equality Action Plan

9.6 Neil asked the members to consider the DoF Business Plan 2026 / 2027 and share remaining input with David by cop 17 April.

Action: Members to consider the DoF Business Plan 2026 / 2027 and share remaining input with David Hughes by cop 17 April

9.7 The members noted the content and actions around the DoF Business Plan 2026 / 2027.

10 People Matters

10.1 David presented the People Matters paper. He asked the members to endorse a reconstituted People and Resource Committee (PRC) and agree its Terms of Reference. Sharon Gallagher, Chair of the previous constitution, explained that the changes brought the DoF PRC more into line with the respective responsibilities of the Board and individual business areas, and that the refined format of the PRC with its emphasis on analysis was a more effective way of bringing HR issues to Board Members' attention. The members endorsed the reconstituted PRC.

10.2 David gave an update on Strategic Workforce Planning which was noted and endorsed by the members.

10.3 David presented the HR Update, highlighting specific issues for the Board's attention. Jill referred to the workforce figures (including temporary promotions) and suggested that all workforce measures reported by business area would be more meaningful if each measure included, alongside the underlying figure: (i) the business area's percentage share of the DoF workforce, and (ii) the business area's percentage share of the DoF total for the measure being reported.

10.4 By way of example, for sickness absence this would show, for each business area, the average days' absence by business area together with the percentage of the DoF workforce and the percentage of total DoF absence. David agreed to adopt this approach in future reporting.

Action: David Hughes to ensure future HR reporting includes, for each business area and each measure, the underlying figure alongside (i) the business area's percentage share of the DoF workforce and (ii) the business area's percentage share of the DoF total for the measure being reported.

10.5 Neil noted that the transformed paper was effective in bringing the Board's considerations around HR issues into a more strategic space. He drew particular attention to the data on Annual Leave Carryover and noted that whilst there may be issues impacting the figures, they are still too high. He welcomed the Committee's intention to check that none of the individuals who have carried over more than nine days' leave this year seek to carry over more than nine next year. He asked the Committee to review Annual Leave uptake during the year and update the members accordingly to prevent excessive applications for Annual Leave Carryover for the 2026 / 2027 year.

Action: People and Resource Committee to review Annual Leave uptake during the year and update the Departmental Board on statistics to prevent excessive applications for Annual Leave Carryover for the 2026 / 2027 year

10.6 Sharon Smyth noted the benefits arising from the accelerated pace of recruitment competitions and thanked NICSHR resourcing staff for their efforts.

10.7 The members noted the People Matters paper.

11 DoF Board Effectiveness Review Response

11.1 David presented the DoF Board Effectiveness Review Response and a proposed set of actions to address recommendations.

11.2 Catherine confirmed that she had drafted a new Departmental Board Member Induction which she will circulate with the members. She noted that feedback from the newest Board Members would be particularly helpful as she intends to make DoF an exemplar in this respect.

Action: Catherine Shannon to share new Departmental Board Member Action Plan with new members and with the Board more widely

11.3 The members noted that the skill set for Grade 3 staff is not an exact match for that of a Board Member and that specialised training would be helpful, but that while this point is accepted, members have responsibility for their own development and there was no need to over-engineer the response.

11.4 Joan noted that the DoF Departmental Board works well and that Neil's committed style of leadership was effective in the leadership role.

11.5 The members agreed the actions including the conclusions reached above.

Gavin Patrick rejoined the meeting.

12 DoF Climate and Sustainability Action Plan

12.1 Tony Simpson presented the DoF Climate and Sustainability Action Plan End of Year Report 2025 / 2026, the Draft Plan for 2026 / 2027 and a broader update on Climate Change.

12.2 The members discussed behavioural change in enabling the achievement of actions supporting sustainability and noted that Integr8 will further drive improvements.

12.3 Neil noted developments on improving the energy estate including commencement of a new energy efficient building in Omagh and forthcoming potential upgrades of older buildings. Olwen proposed that Tony should consider referencing SAMU in the Draft Plan for 2026 / 2027 as it should contribute to significant carbon reductions.

Action: Tony Simpson to consider making direct reference to SAMU in the Draft Climate and Sustainability Action Plan 2026 / 2027

12.4 Sharon Smyth asked whether there has been thought given to the development of a guide to decision making around climate and sustainability matters. Tony will consider.

Action: Tony Simpson to consider the development of guidance around decision making in relation to climate and sustainability matters

12.5 Neil asked the members to submit feedback to Tony Simpson by cop 17 April.

Actions: Members to submit feedback on the DoF Climate and Sustainability Action Plan End of Year Report 2025 / 2026 and the Draft Plan for 2026 / 2027 by cop 17 April

12.6 The members noted the update on the DoF Climate and Sustainability Action Plan End of Year Report 2025 / 2026, the Draft Plan for 2026 / 2027 and the broader update on Climate Change.

ITEMS FOR INFORMATION

Projects and Programmes

13 DoF Major Programmes and Projects

13.1 Sharon Smyth presented the report on the status of DoF Major Programmes and Projects. She noted that the Civil Service Pensions System Project had been closed and that the People Strategy had now been classified as a DoF Programme.

13.2 Sharon Gallagher noted that she and Neil would attend PAC the following week to give an update on LPS projects.

13.3 The members noted the update on DoF Major Programmes and Projects.

14 People Strategy

14.1 Jill reported on the People Strategy Update Report, which had previously been received and endorsed by the NICS Board, and on the DoF response to the NIAO Leading and Resourcing the NICS Report, which had been endorsed by the NICS Board People Committee and approved by the Finance Committee.

14.2 Jill and David will work together to consider how best to refine the DoF's People Plan to better reflect the agreed NICS People Strategy. Paul Duffy will provide input on DoF's readiness to migrate to Integr8.

Action: Jill Minne and David Hughes to consider how best to refine DoF's People Plan to better reflect the NICS People Strategy together with input from Paul Duffy on DoF's readiness to migrate to Integr8

14.3 The members noted the People Strategy Update Report and the DoF response to the NIAO Leading and Resourcing the NICS Report.

15 DoF Legacy IT Risk Assessment March 2026

15.1 Paul Grocott presented the update on the DoF Legacy IT Risk Assessment giving the position at March 2026.

15.2 Neil asked the members to consider the report and associated risks and report any concerns about risk assurance back to him and to Paul Grocott.

Action: Members to consider the update on DoF Legacy IT Systems and report any concerns back to Neil Gibson and Paul Grocott

15.3 Joan noted that the report is to be shared with DARC and asked for additional detail to be included in that report on how long each risk is expected to last.

Action: Paul Grocott to include additional detail on expected risk duration in his report on DoF Legacy IT Systems for DARC

15.4 The members agreed on the importance of risk visibility to the drawing up of mitigations.

15.5 The members noted the update on DoF Legacy IT Systems.

16 Shared Services Temperature Check

16.1 Neil referred to the Shared Services Survey results from March 2026 which had been circulated among the members. He noted that the completion rate had been less than hoped and he will encourage a higher response rate in future. David agreed noting that future results can be used to validate improvements in service delivery. Neil noted he will bring the report to the Perm Sec Stocktake meeting semi-annually.

17 DARC Update

17.1 Joan provided a report summarising discussions at the DARC meeting of 10 February 2026, including updates on the Cyber Security Review, NIAO matters, and a review on mechanisms to identify and address when things go wrong.

18 Communications Update

18.1 In Ciarrai Conlan's absence this item was not covered.

19 Papers to Note

19.1 David noted that the DoF Data Protection Officer Report to SIRO had issued to the members in the interim between the February and April meetings.

20 AOB

Statutory Duties in Relation to Language and Cultural Identity

20.1 David noted that he would attend a briefing on the issue at Belfast City Hall after which he will provide an update at a future Permanent Secretary Stocktake meeting.

21 Date of Next Meeting

21.1 The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 24 June 2026 in Clare House.

21.2 The meeting closed with no further business.

Roger Walker

21 April 2026