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| **TITLE/ORGANISATION** | Minutes – Departmental Board Meeting |
| **VENUE:** | Boardroom, 2nd Floor, Clare House |
| **DATE/TIME:** | 10.00 am, 3rd December 2025 |
| **List of Attendees**: | Neil Gibson<br>Jill Minne<br>Tony Simpson<br>Sharon Smyth<br>Paul Duffy<br>Philip Wales<br>Tracey McCavigan (left at 13.00)<br>Gavin Patrick<br>David Hughes<br>Ciarrai Conlan<br>Olwen Laird (NEBM)<br>Joan McEwan(NEBM)<br>Chris Rooney for Sharon Gallagher<br>Ross Thompson for Louise Crilly<br>Debbie Sherlock for Catherine Shannon<br><br>Joy Allen – Leading Governance, Board Effectiveness Review - Observer<br><br>Jill Evans - Minutes |
| **Apologies:** | Louise Crilly, Catherine Shannon, Sharon Gallagher |

**KEY POINTS DISCUSSED:**

**1. <u>Welcome/Apologies/Conflicts of Interest</u>**

Apologies were noted. No conflicts of interest declared.
NG welcomed Joy Allen (JA) as an observer for the Board Effectiveness Review.

**<u>Chair's remarks</u>**

- NG thanked Jill for her service as Secretariat, noting this was her final meeting before the role transfers to Corporate Services. He welcomed CC to her first meeting following temporary promotion to Director of Communications and Engagement Division.

- JA outlined proposed work programme on the Board Effectiveness Review, revising the existing questionnaire for distribution to members in December, scheduling interviews with nine colleagues, and preparing a draft report which she will present to Board at 4 February meeting.

- NG suggested for scheduling of 2026 Board Meetings to avoid December and flagged the next Board meeting has moved to 4 February 2026 at Conference Room, Lanyon Plaza, Belfast. Members to consider time and venue preferences for future meetings and decision will be made at February Board.

- The Deaths, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill passed its final stage of the legislative process on 2 December. NG thanked PW and his team for their contribution.

- Lots of hard, collaborative working between PSG, SPAR and CAED last week, briefing the Minister on the outcome of the Budget ahead of media interviews. Autumn Budget presents significant challenges for 2025/26 with limited additional Barnett from the UK Budget (£18.8m). Extensive work ongoing by PSG on December Monitoring Round and multi-year budget.

- AO recruitment events have been successful, with high attendance and positive feedback. NG told members he attended one of the events and found it uplifting and inspiring to see and feel the buzz and enthusiasm. He also emphasised the need for innovation and continuous improvement in relation to recruitment. Highlighted given pilot approach, feedback, including that of TUS colleagues, will be taken onboard.

- Members were encouraged to plan leave over Christmas and review working patterns to ensure sustainability.

**2. Minutes of Last Meeting (Paper 1a)**

The Board were content with the minutes of 8 October 2025 meeting.

**3. Action Points (Paper 1b)**

CC addressed outstanding action points and updates reviewed. Updates were provided on Audit Reports, Early Alert system and weather warnings.

**AP1:** NG and TMcC to meet to discuss Audit Reports. Will consider and update members at next Stocktake meeting.
**AP2**: NG to raise weather warnings with PSS.

**4. DoF Oversight of Major Projects and Programmes (Paper 2)**

SS provided a six-monthly update on the activity of Major Projects and Programmes. A summary of the Gateway review and Highlight report was detailed and the rag status of the five DOF programmes and Projects discussed.

She confirmed an SRO meeting had taken place and emphasised the paper provides assurance the Department is effectively managing its projects. Members agreed it would be beneficial to share all Gateway reports and compile a consolidated list of recommendations. SS advised a dedicated project team will be established and confirmed actions from the previous SRO meeting have been completed. The Executive has approved a public procurement statement, and NG will write to Permanent Secretaries to reinforce transparency to help improve clarity and also invite greater scrutiny.

The Board discussed the red status of the CS Pensions System project and implications. SS highlighted the Department's skills audit and its alignment with the ongoing Job Families work led by P&OD.

Members acknowledged the challenge of securing and retaining experienced staff for critical projects, noting this is under active consideration by SROs. JMcE queried whether the high–medium risk rating for the five main projects reflects scale of impact and suggested adding descriptors to RAG ratings to align with the Department's Risk Register. Members also discussed Gateway Reviews across programmes and noted most projects are in scope for scrutiny by NICS Infrastructure Committee/NICS Board. SS confirmed the Executive receives a capital spend report via Datamap.

**AP3**: SS to arrange to have a descriptor against the RAGs to read across to the Department's Risk Register.

The Board were content with the DoF Oversight of Major Projects and Programmes report.

**5. Governance, Audit and Risk (Papers 3a – 3d)**

**DoF Corporate Risk Register 2025/26**

GP provided an update on the Risk paper, advising that, as agreed at October Board meeting, there will be a focused discussion at each Board or a specific risk, however due to CS absence, this will move to the February Board meeting.

It is planned to set out a programme in advance to aid discussion. Members had no suggested changes and Audit Committee were content.

NG noted that the Shared Service finance risk has been added, highlighting two key issues: it is a cross-departmental risk with increased criticality and known overspend outside this Department. While the Board has applied the appropriate rules and reported the issue, there is currently no mitigation mechanism beyond providing assurance.

GP clarified that the primary risk relates to potential penalties. OL suggested updating the register to reflect awareness of the issue, even though it has not yet materialised. JMcE raised concerns about how wider shared risks - such as Cyber Security and the NI budget vs spend - are communicated to other departments and at NICS Board level and asked what framework exists to do so. GP proposed that initial sharing could occur through the year-end assurance statement. DH recommended this matter may be better addressed at Permanent Secretary level. OL advised that she had suggested to Frank Kirkland, Chair of the NICS NEDs forum that a presentation by Joanne McBurney/PSD at a future NICS NEDs Forum would be helpful in raising awareness of current NI budget performance with wider departmental NEDs. Olwen Laird agreed to contact Frank Kirkland, Chair of the NICs NEDs Forum to arrange this.

**AP4**: OL to contact Frank Kirkland, Chair of the NEDs Forum, to arrange presentation by JMcB to raise awareness of current NI budget performance.

NG noted the need to establish a mechanism for notifying other departments when changes occur in shared service risks recorded in the DoF Risk Register. One option proposed was issuing a quarterly extract from DoF register by Corporate Services to avoid reliance on year-end reporting.

OL suggested developing a narrative for Risk 5 as it is currently the only risk with an 'open appetite.' A comprehensive review of all departmental risks is required. As there is no central NICS risk register, members discussed the implications of NICS-level risks, being reported in the DoF register.

PD referred to cyber security, noting ongoing discussions with the SIRO Forum to determine what assurances can be provided to departments from DSF and likewise, what assurances can be provided from departments so there is a collective understanding of known vulnerabilities. It was intended that this information would be reflected in the SIRO Forum Annual Report. He stated that a distinction needed to be made between the DoF Cyber Incident Response Plan and an NICS Cyber Incident Response Plan. Creating separate plans would be taken forward in the New Year, with a view of testing both plans in 2026. Members agreed that shared service risks should be categorised as NICS risks rather than DoF-specific risks.

DH confirmed within DoF there is a developing function between SIRO and line of business functions. PW requested sight of the Internal Audit report on cyber security. Members noted that the DSO annual thematic report, SIRO meeting outputs, and IA thematic reports will be presented to the NICS Board. JMcE queried whether there is an appetite for a NICS-wide risk register. GP confirmed that risk appetite is under review and highlighted the need for consistency in risk management approaches across departments.

TS confirmed that Action Point on Risk Register 6c (Transformation Board) has been completed and will update the wording regarding funding allocation. OL noted that adding a supporting comment would be helpful.

**AP5**: NG, DH and GP to discuss inclusion of NICS-level risks into DoF Register.
**AP6:** PD to share Internal Audit report on cyber security with PW.

**AP7:** TS to provide updated wording for Risk Register 6c (Transformation Board) regarding funding allocation along with a supporting comment.

**DoF Business Plan 2025/26 at 31 October 2025**

GP reported on progress against the 2025–26 Business Plan as at 31 October 2025. Six targets (6b, 7b, 7c, 22, 29, and 30) have moved from light green to solid green. OL noted that only three targets are unlikely to be met and questioned whether objectives are sufficiently challenging. JMcE suggested reflecting the effort involved in delivery, with NG advising this would be addressed in the year-end review. GP confirmed overall performance will be captured in the Annual Report.

## 6. Finance Update (Paper 4)

GP reported on the Department's budget position following December monitoring. He noted a small easement on non-earmarked funds and outlined Change Fund proposals to support future planning. He also outlined current easements are largely due to vacancies. Capital finances are in a stronger position, aided by technical savings related to Clare House and ground rent adjustments.

The Board discussed office estate matters, including the planned sale of office accommodation. JMcE queried if there were any anticipated delays to property sales akin to last year which might impact year end accounts, and it was confirmed there were no concerns in this regard. NG commended members for maintaining budget discipline under significant pressure. He highlighted savings achieved through Integr8 negotiations on licensing, crediting the Commercial Team and CPD for their efforts.

Future budget considerations, recruitment levels, critical vacancies, and Accounting Officer responsibilities were discussed. The NIAO report on Capacity and Capability was noted, and PW raised queries on departmental budget and Change Fund usage.

GP confirmed that a substantial number of vacancies remain but expects easements to reduce as the year progresses. He invited suggestions on optimal use of the Change Fund. The discussion also covered Dundonald House, Ministerial meeting attendance, and resource efficiency, with the Minister emphasising the need to avoid unnecessary expenditure.

GP updated members on the Department's prompt payment performance advising that for the last three consecutive months DoF exceeded the 10-day KPI target paying over 90% of its invoices within 10 days. GP also updated members on changes in the Audit Office team.

The Board noted the Finance update.

## 7. People Strategy (Verbal)

JM provided an update on the Civil Service People Strategy. Governance arrangements have been strengthened, and reporting to the NICS Board is now well established. The People Committee, chaired by Laura McKeaveney and comprising HoCS, Permanent Secretaries, and JM, has refreshed its terms of reference. Updates from the People Committee are shared with the NICS Board, which recently received a highlight report confirming overall progress, with the exception of Digital Skills, which has moved to red status and requires further discussion.

A key upcoming priority is the development of a master plan to support the two-year roadmap, addressing resource constraints and focusing on strategic workforce planning and the workforce model — scheduled for completion by March 2026 and aligned with Integr8. JM recommended that this Board receive NICS Board reports for noting. NG agreed it would be helpful if the NICS Board highlight and update reports were shared with this Board to note. He also emphasised the importance of articulating the effort involved in delivering these initiatives and advised that PD will attend the NICS Board in January 2026 to give an Integr8 update.

JM advised engagement remains strong, supported by recent workshops and extensive feedback and that Mark Wishart from the Strategic Investment Board is now supporting the initiative with a focus on ensuring alignment and delivery of key strategic strands.

The Board noted the Civil Service People Strategy update.

**8. Integr8 Programme Update (Presentation)**

PD delivered a presentation on Integr8, outlining its strategic benefits and current status. The programme aims to standardise policies and processes across functions and departments to improve efficiency and enable data-driven decision-making through a single integrated HR and finance solution.

The new solution will replace outdated 20 year old technology with a continuously updated platform, avoiding the need for major system upgrades.

The programme currently holds an amber status due to complexity, the significant change impact and ongoing resourcing challenges. A Delivery Partner has been appointed and the detailed design phase commenced. PD presented a comprehensive programme plan highlighting key milestones, interdependencies, and the co-design approach underpinning this significant change initiative.

Wave Go-live dates agreed for implementation: Finance will be implemented in waves 1–3, followed by HR in waves 4–5. DoF will be in the first wave of finance roll out. A draft departmental transition plan will be available by the end of March 2026. Organisational design work is progressing, with a number of functions/activities transitioning to a Global Business Service model; high-level structure and an approach to transitioning is currently being progressed with support from People & OD and NICSHR.

The Board will receive further visibility on the Global Business Service and Integr8 updates on a regular basis between now and go-live. NG emphasised model towards a shared service delivery with strong leadership and engagement, while JM noted the cultural shift required and its alignment with the People Strategy. Members agreed that preparatory changes to ways of working should be prioritised. The Board discussed how to maintain business continuity during implementation.

The Board noted the Integr8 update.

**9. DARC Update (Paper 6)**

JMcE reported on the DARC meeting of 11 November. Key points included:

- An update on the LPS rates incident, actions regarding unpaid rates and updated efforts to obtain more accurate figures for the fraud and error rates in rate rebate. LPS agreed to provide NG with a paper outlining issues and steps taken to resolve.
- Audit Office presented its final governance report.
- Capacity and Capability report delayed so deep dive postponed until later into 2026.
- Progress on RHI recommendations noted.
- An update on the GovAssure process and departmental compliance; a further update is expected in April.
- Internal Audit presented their progress plan and new charter.
- Assurance around governance arrangements within SEUPB continue to be of significant concern for DARC. DARC members will give consideration to what is expected from SEUPB to provide adequate assurance going forward. A standard template update is being drafted to ensure clarity and structure for sharing with SPAR colleagues in liaison with SEUPB.
- Work continues on assurance statements, with efforts to make papers more accessible and logically sequenced.
- CR reported on Rate Rebate issues and the constructive engagement with DfC regarding non-compliance, fraud, and error. Figures will be available in Quarter 4 for Audit Office reporting.

NG advised that work is ongoing on assurance statements, trialling easier ways to read papers and ways to sequence that. JMcE queried if limited IA reports going to the Assembly Finance Committee would also include SEUPB, and NG agreed to clarify this.

**AP8**: NG to clarify whether limited IA reports going to the Assembly Finance Committee will also include SEUPB.

Members noted the DARC update.

**10. Departmental Legislative Update (Paper 7)**

NG reported that the Department successfully completed the legislative process for the Baby Loss Bill, noting the complexity of the work and the professionalism demonstrated throughout. This paper has been prepared as a lessons-learned paper for Board awareness. PW highlighted the importance of precision in legislative language and commended the report's value.

Members discussed existing TEO guidance and the need to seek advice from colleagues with experience, early in the process. DH emphasised that current guidance may not cover all scenarios and recommended identifying colleagues with relevant experience. He noted reduced expertise within TEO and the absence of a reference to or register for secondary legislation. The new SL1 process will extend timelines by approximately four weeks, limiting flexibility. Teams involved in secondary legislation should provide feedback and ensure DoF's position is reflected at PSS.

NG advised consulting experienced colleagues. DH confirmed that primary legislation requires a dedicated policy team supported by solicitors. PD shared insights from his experience with Digital Economy legislation and the LCM process. NG indicated consideration of a departmental model to consolidate legislative expertise.

DH reminded members that all DoF legislation feeds into the Executive's overarching legislative programme and members discussed risks if timelines slip before the end of the mandate.

Members noted the Departmental Legislation update paper.

**AP9**: NG to consider and discuss a possible departmental model for legislation process with DH.

**11. People and Resources Committee Update (Paper 5)**

DH provided an update on the PRC meeting held on 20 November. He commended Mark McLaughlin for advancing the Committee's effectiveness and thanked SG for assuming the Chair role. Recruitment processes have improved, and progress continues in the right direction.

DH highlighted the Job Families project as a valuable initiative, with strong engagement driving refinement and successful outcomes. He added the more we put into it the more we see it developing and concluding to everyone's benefit.

Members were advised that DfC launched its Jobstart Scheme in October, with a deadline for departmental input and placement opportunities. NG encouraged all areas to identify opportunities to participate, positioning the Department as an exemplar in embracing Jobstart schemes and student placements to attract and lock in more talent.

HR Connect pressures have eased, workforce planning discussions are ongoing and temporary promotions are under review. OL requested that KPI data be routinely presented to the Board to improve visibility of challenges. DS shared positive feedback on Jobstart participation, while JM noted that MI reports focus heavily on activity rather than outcomes. SS raised retention allowances and thanked GP and Olivia Martin for progressing this matter. JM referred to a two tier process for

filling posts between PRC and HR and NG advised he would discuss the process for filling posts through PRC with SG.

NG asked Directors to provide his office with an update on TP positions ahead of their 1:1 meetings.

Members agreed they were content with the People and Resources Committee update paper.

**AP10**: NG to discuss the process for filling posts through PRC and subsequent HR steps with SG.

**12. Communications Update (Verbal)**

CC gave an update in relation to communications across the department including:

- Key dates which can be found on the Private Office Hub ie 11 December next Executive meeting. Minister's in-box closing 18 December with diary focused on Budget.
- Media update – Strategic Roadmap on Rating Policy Oral statement coverage; Autumn Budget coverage.
- Government Advertising Returns due with GAU by 9 January.
- NICS Live events including Pensions event with over 2400 people either attending or viewing. Two events in November delivered, and two events in both December and January scheduled.
- DoF Long Service events arranged for 18 February and, if needed, 4 March for staff with over 35 and 40 years' service by end 2025.
- NICS-wide Long Service pilot event arranged for 28 January for NICS staff with 50 or more years' service. Distinct and separate event to DoF event and DoF have 13 staff in this category.
- Updated Design process has been implemented to include additional checks and balances, following IA review of LPS Billing incident.
- Ministerial internal visit programme;
- Team Volunteering under Business in the Community contract – get in touch with Internal Communications to utilise remaining volunteering opportunities.
- Staff Engagement Event arranged for 14 January.

**13.AOB**

- Board Effectiveness Review: NG confirmed that a draft questionnaire will be issued to Board members to assess effectiveness. Responses will inform the review.

- In addition, there will be a questionnaire specifically on NG; his leadership and account of his performance. This will be discussed at a forthcoming Stocktake. NG draft questionnaire for Directors to be shared with Joy Allen in the first instance and item added to Stocktake agenda.

- Cyber Security Training: PD outlined plans for a five-module training programme for Board members commencing next year, in response to heightened cyber threats. Completion rates will be monitored and reported to the Board. Additional measures include ongoing phishing exercises and consideration of a Cyber Awareness session for the NICS Board, particularly for new members. PD will provide updates over time.

- Research: TS advised that DoF has identified approximately 40 potential research topics and Wendy Lecky will liaise with Suzanne to agree next steps, with PW included in discussions.

**AP11:** NG's draft questionnaire on his leadership to be shared with Joy Allen in the first instance and item added to Stocktake agenda.

14. **Date of Next Meeting**

The next meeting is 4th February at 10.30 am in Conference Room, Lanyon Plaza.

AP1: Action Point of 8 Oct - NG and TMcC to meet to discuss Audit Reports. Will consider and update members at next Stocktake meeting.

AP2: Action Point of 8 Oct - NG to raise weather warnings with PSS.
AP3: Risk Register - SS to arrange to have a descriptor against the rags to read across to the Department's Risk Register.
AP4: OL to contact Frank Kirkland, Chair of the NEDs Forum, to arrange presentation by JMcB to raise awareness of current NI budget performance.
AP5: Risk Register - NG, DH and GP to discuss inclusion of NICS-level risks into DoF Register.
AP6: PD to share Internal Audit report on cyber security with PW.
AP7: Risk Register - TS to provide updated wording for Risk Register 6c (Transformation Board) regarding funding allocation along with a supporting comment.
AP8: NG to clarify whether limited IA reports going to the Assembly Finance Committee will also include SEUPB.
AP9: NG to consider and discuss a possible departmental model for legislation process with DH.
AP10: PRC paper - NG to discuss the process for filling posts through PRC and subsequent HR steps with SG.
AP11:NG's draft questionnaire on his leadership to be shared with Joy Allen in the first instance and item added to Stocktake agenda.

| **Minutes written by:** | **Date:** |
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| Jill Evans | 3rd December 2025 |