Minutes – DoF Departmental Board Meeting
4 February 2026

Attendees: Sharon Smyth (Interim Chair)
Ciarrai Conlan
Louise Crilly
Paul Duffy
Sharon Gallagher
David Hughes
Joanne McBurney
Tracy McCavigan
Gavin Patrick
Catherine Shannon
Tony Simpson
Philip Wales
Mark Wishart (deputising for Jill Minne)
Olwen Laird (NEBM)
Joan McEwan (NEBM)
Joy Allen – Leading Governance, Board Effectiveness Review – Items 1,2 only
Roger Walker - Secretariat

Apologies: Neil Gibson
Jill Minne

Location: Upper Ground Floor Atrium Conference Room, Lanyon Plaza

1. Welcome and Declarations of Interest

1.1 Sharon Smyth chaired the meeting in Neil Gibson's absence. The members congratulated Louise Crilly on her appointment to the role of Departmental Solicitor and Head of Government Legal Service for Northern Ireland.

1.2 The members confirmed there were no conflicts of interest.

2. Update on Board Effectiveness Review

2.1 Joy Allen presented her report outlining the Board's strengths and recommendations.

2.2 The members discussed several of the recommendations in greater depth. They considered the proposal to introduce measures to mitigate the risk of over-reliance on the current Chair, given Neil's role as Permanent Secretary. Olwen Laird noted that while informal arrangements exist, a more formalised system of deputisation may be appropriate. Paul Duffy added that any such approach should align with Neil's commitment to collective leadership.

2.3 The members considered the merits and practical arrangements associated with the recommendation to hold a Board Away Day to facilitate informal engagement among members.

2.4 The Board considered the recommendation to establish a standardised Board induction process, recognising the need for the programme to be adaptable to the requirements of individual Board members, particularly where members were transferred from other Departments and would already have Board experience. Catherine Shannon advised that NICSHR has recently completed work on the induction programme for Permanent Secretaries and confirmed that she will now begin development of a corresponding induction process for Departmental Board Members.

Action: Catherine Shannon to share the induction process for Permanent Secretaries with the Board Members

Action: Catherine Shannon to develop an induction process for Board Members

2.5 Joy emphasised the importance of using the Governance Action Plan to track progress against the actions recommended in her report. She will prepare a final version of the report which she will submit asap together with an invoice for her work.

Action: Joy Allen to submit a final version of her Review of Board Effectiveness report together with an invoice for payment

2.6 Joy thanked the Board Members for their cooperation, and Sharon Smyth thanked her for her work on behalf of Neil Gibson and the Board.

2.7 The members noted the Review of Board Effectiveness Report.

2.8 Sharon asked about the next step for the Board in terms of the Report. David advised that his team would develop the action plan and seek agreement from the Board on how to address the actions. He advised that his team would then track progress of the delivery of the actions.

Action: David Hughes to bring the action plan and suggested responses to the actions to the Board for agreement.

Joy Allen left the meeting.

3. Apologies, Minutes and Action Points

3.1 Sharon Smyth noted an apology from Jill Minne (Mark Wishart deputising) due to a ministerial commitment.

3.2 The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

3.3 Sharon Smyth reported on progress against actions from the previous meeting, confirming that some items had been completed and closed. She also highlighted that several actions remain outstanding and still require follow-up.

Action Point 4, DB Meeting of 18 September 2024 – 'Consideration to be given to holding dedicated Board to discuss 3/5 year planning' – Gavin Patrick confirmed that work is continuing on determining next steps.

Action Point 1, DB Meeting of 3 December 2025 – 'NG and TMcC to meet to discuss Audit Reports' – Tracy McCavigan will chase this up.

Action Point 4, DB Meeting of 3 December 2025 – 'OL to contact Frank Kirkland, Chair of the NEDs Forum, to arrange presentation by JMcB to raise awareness of current NI budget performance' – Joanne McBurney will chase this up.

Action Point 5, DB Meeting of 3 December 2025 – 'NG, DH and GP to discuss inclusion of NICS-level risks into DoF Register' – Gavin Patrick and David Hughes will arrange this meeting with Neil Gibson.

Action Point 8, DB Meeting of 3 December 2025 – 'NG to clarify whether limited IA reports going to the Assembly Finance Committee will also include SEUPB – this action was deferred until the April Meeting in Neil Gibson's absence.

Action Point 9, DB Meeting of 3 December 2025 - NG to consider and discuss a possible departmental model for legislation process with DH' – this action was deferred until the April Meeting in Neil Gibson's absence.

4. Business Planning 2026 / 2027

4.1 David Hughes noted that he has commenced a series of meetings with the members to discuss the targets in the context of the last year of the mandate. The members agreed the need for a uniform approach aimed at a scaled back set of targets for the forthcoming year.

4.2 The members noted the progress made on business planning for 2026 / 2027.

5. Outcome of the Expert Panel on Public Procurement Governance Arrangements

5.1 Sharon Smyth presented her paper, outlining the rationale for the review arising from the 2024 PAC report on Public Procurement in Northern Ireland

and summarising the panel's work, findings, recommendations, and the next steps pending the Minister's consideration.

5.2 Olwen highlighted the likely need for additional staffing within the procurement team to deliver the recommendations.

5.3 Members discussed the need for clearer delineation of departmental roles and responsibilities in relation to procurement and shared services for both DoF staff and colleagues across other departments. Tracey McCavigan proposed including wording in end-of-year audit reports to reflect this distinction, and David Hughes will support this work.

Action: Tracey McCavigan and David Hughes to liaise on the drafting of a form of words to reflect the delineation in the roles and responsibilities between DoF and other Departments around shared services

5.4 Joan noted that this distinction would make a great remit for discussion at the NEDs Forum.

5.5 Sharon Smyth agreed to forward a copy of the report to the members.

Action: Sharon Smyth to send a copy of the Review of Public Procurement Governance Arrangements Report to the members

5.6 The members noted the Review of Public Procurement Governance Arrangements Report.

6. Governance, Audit and Risk

DoF Corporate Risk Register 2025 / 2026

6.1 Gavin Patrick reported on the recent update of the DoF Corporate Risk Register for 2025/26, reflecting the position as at 31 December. He noted that three risks remain rated red, five amber and two yellow, with no items at green and no changes or new risks since the previous review.

6.2 Members reviewed the Register's format and discussed whether it effectively supports risk identification and action tracking. Olwen Laird questioned whether the current layout provides sufficient detail. Paul Duffy highlighted that the current approach does not provide sufficient visibility of the most immediate risks the Board should be focussing on. There was agreement that ongoing format issues undermine its usefulness and that the new business year provides an opportunity to adopt a more accessible, user-friendly design. While a dedicated session at a potential away day was considered helpful, it was agreed that Gavin will refine the format in the interim.

Action: Gavin Patrick to refine format of DoF Corporate Risk Register

6.3 The members stressed the need for the Risk Register to clearly distinguish between DoF-owned risks and those shared with other departments. Mark Wishart observed that risk ratings had not changed since the previous update and questioned whether this reflected accurate risk management. Gavin confirmed that a review of risk appetite is required and that a paper on tolerance levels will go to DARC before the Board.

6.4 Joanne McBurney briefed members on NICS Risk 1: Executive Budget Allocations, noting that several departments remain in overspend, creating a potential risk of breaching the NI budget at block level. Engagement with departments is ongoing.

6.5 As agreed at the last Board meeting, Catherine and Mark provided a deep-dive into NICS Risk 3: People/Resources, highlighting alignment with the NICS People Strategy 2025–2030 and progress on wellbeing, in-house recruitment, learning and development, and induction. Mark also reported the launch of the Strategic Workforce Planning toolkit.

6.6 All members agreed that the deep-dive into Risk 3 was very beneficial. Some members noted that Catherine had provided mitigations and a stronger assurance on the management of the risk in the deep dive that would be beneficial to detail in the risk register. Joan requested that a summary of the deep dive be included in future meeting packs. Gavin will identify the next risk for detailed review.

6.7 The members noted the status of the DoF Corporate Risk Register as at 31 December 2025 and the discussions around its format.

DoF Business Plan 2025 / 2026

6.8 Gavin provided an update on progress against the targets in the DoF Business Plan 2025/26 as at 31 December 2025. He reported that 33% of targets have been achieved, 54% remain on track for completion within the year, and 13% are expected to be delivered outside the planned timeframe.

6.9 He noted that several business areas had submitted their returns late and reminded members of the importance of meeting deadlines. Olwen and Joan also highlighted concerns about insufficient narrative to support the RAG status or high level status and requested that future updates include fuller explanations in the narrative column.

Action: Members to ensure governance returns to DoF Corporate Governance are filed within the timeframe and with sufficient narrative detail to effectively reflect current status.

6.10 David clarified that any significant targets which are not achieved in 2025 / 2026 ought to be carried over into the Business Plan for 2026 / 2027.

6.11 The members noted the status of progress against Business Plan 2025 / 2026 targets.

7. Finance Update

7.1 Gavin presented the Finance Paper, outlining the Department's current budget position. He reminded members to continue reviewing budgets critically and to alert Finance Business Partners to any issues at the earliest opportunity. He also confirmed that an updated Contracts Register template will be issued to business areas shortly.

7.2 Sharon advised that the Department would be exposed if the Contracts Register was not up to date as this was a requirement within a DAO and that the Department was confirming it was complete in response to the NIAO Report on Major IT Projects. Joan said that she felt the Department was managing this well as there were very few Direct Award Contracts due to contracts expiring.

7.3 In response to Olwen's query on aged debt, Gavin explained that new processes are being developed to ensure more consistent debt-chasing and improved monitoring. He added that his team is considering what additional information could be provided to business areas to support effective financial management.

7.4 The members noted the Finance Update.

8. Cyber Security Update

8.1 Paul Duffy provided a verbal Cyber Security update, highlighting Neil Gibson's concern about staff storing information on laptops, which breaches policy and creates security risks. He reminded colleagues that Content Manager was currently the NICS official repository for storing information and OneDrive was available for storing personal information, temporary copies of working drafts or reference materials. He will issue guidance on the appropriate use and how to make best use of MS365 OneDrive.

Action: Paul Duffy to circulate guidance the use of MS365 OneDrive.

8.2 Paul also reported on NICS Risks 4 and 5 (IT Network). He noted that although organisations are assessed before onboarding to the network, there is currently no process to confirm ongoing compliance. An annual assurance statement will be introduced, with follow-up action where required. Olwen Laird warned that a single non-compliant organisation could compromise the entire network. Assurance statements will be reviewed and reported on to the NICS Board by the SIRO Forum.

8.3 Paul reminded members of the requirement, as agreed at the previous Board meeting, to complete the monthly Cyber Governance for Boards training.

8.4 The members noted the verbal update on Cyber Security.

9.0 People and Resourcing Committee

9.1 Sharon Gallagher presented the People and Resourcing Committee Update Paper, noting that a subgroup has been established to revise the DoF People Plan 2025–2027, with the initial meeting postponed.

9.2 David confirmed that a newly appointed member of the Departmental Development Team has commenced work on workforce-planning activity for the Department.

9.3 The members noted the update from the People and Resourcing Committee.

10. Communications Update

10.1 Ciarrai Conlan provided a verbal Communications update, covering media liaison activity on the multi-year budget, Treasury negotiations and Reval 2026. She also reported on internal communications, including NICS Live, the upcoming staff engagement event with Minister and volunteering events.

10.2 Ciarrai highlighted the importance of briefing for Minister’s Oral Questions being concise, relevant and as an opportunity to convey positively the work of the Department.

10.3 The members noted the communications update.

10.4 Sharon Gallagher asked for her thanks to be put on record for Ciarrai and her teams support in response to the pausing of the Reval2026 exercise. She added thanks for Angela Ross from DSF who had helped the team understand the full functionality of Microsoft teams.

11. AOB

Corporate Responses to Extreme Weather

11.1 David provided an update on corporate responses to extreme weather, including the Department's effective communications during Storm Chandra.

11.2 Members discussed roles and responsibilities relating to decisions on building closures. David will circulate the paper prepared for the Permanent Secretary Stocktake, and Sharon will provide the Premises Guide, both of which offer relevant guidance.

Action: David Hughes to share the paper for Permanent Secretary Stocktake on Corporate Responses to Extreme Weather with the members

Action: Sharon Smyth to share a copy of the Premises Guide with the members

Functions Review

11.3 David thanked members for their input, which informed advice to the Minister on functions suitable for transfer. He will share a summary with members.

Action: David Hughes to share a summary of functions proposed for transfer out of the Department with the members

Meeting Calendar for 2026

11.4 The members proposed that DB meetings be scheduled on a bi-monthly basis for the remainder of the year, to be held in Clare House on a Wednesday morning at 9am and conclude at 1pm to avoid any conflict with attendance at the Finance Committee.

12. Date of Next Meeting

12.1 To be confirmed.

12.2 The meeting closed with no further business.

Roger Walker

9 February 2026