**Minutes – DoF Departmental Board Meeting**
**24 June 2026**

**Attendees:** Neil Gibson (Chair)
Deborah Brown
Ciarrai Conlan
Paul Duffy
Sharon Gallagher
Paul Grocott
David Hughes
Tracey McCavigan (via Teams)
Jill Minne
Gavin Patrick
Catherine Shannon
Tony Simpson
Joanne Timoney
Philip Wales
Colin Woods
Olwen Laird (NEBM)
Heather Caulfield - Secretariat

**Apologies:** Louise Crilly (Joanne Timoney deputising)
Joan McEwan (NEBM)

**Location:** Second Floor Conference Room, Clare House

## 1. Welcome and Declarations of Interest

1.1 Neil Gibson welcomed members, noted apologies and confirmed no conflicts of interest.

## 2. Chairman's Remarks

2.1 Neil highlighted:

a. Budgets: the current position regarding the absence of an agreed Budget, with significant in-year overcommitment at block level due to inescapable departmental pressures.

b. Baby Loss Certificates: successful launch event held in Parliament Buildings with strong positive feedback from Ministers and stakeholders on the work the Department had carried out and how it was completed – thanks to Philip Wales and his team for bringing the legislation forward.

c. Pride: the NICS position in relation to Pride this year is based on clear legal advice that participation would call into question the impartiality of the NICS. Leaders must be cognisant of the impact this may have on staff and reaffirm the NICS commitment to support for LGBTQ+ and diversity and inclusion. Jill Minne added that a Q&A pack will be issued

to departments and that the decision was made in the context of the statement from Belfast Pride that Pride is a protest and the need for Civil Servants to be impartial as set out in the NICS Code of Ethics.

d. Health and Wellbeing: members were reminded to contact Catherine Shannon if they would find it helpful for her to attend SMTs to speak about support for Health and Wellbeing.

e. Negotiations with UKG: thanks to Deborah Brown and Tony Simpson and their teams for the recent engagement with UKG.

## 3. Minutes and Action Points

3.1 The minutes of the meeting on 15th April 2026 and the Extraordinary Board meeting on 28th May 2026 were agreed.

3.2 An update on the outstanding action points from the meeting on 24 April 2026 was provided. All actions are now closed except for Action Point 2: Joan McEwan to raise the issue of consistent cyber training with other DARCs – a framework for training will be issued towards the end of the calendar year.

## ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

## 4. NICSHR and NISRA update on Absence Deep Dive research work

4.1 Catherine presented on the absence deep dive research work (presentation circulated to DB members), detailing emerging priorities and focused interventions based on the research. It was highlighted that standardisation allows for fair comparison. NICSHR is converting MI/NISRA signals into practical support, pilots and service improvements, moving from reactive absence management to prevention, learning and scaling what works.

4.2 Neil noted that wrap around care needs support at a senior level, thinking about how teams are set up and how they work. Additionally, although exploitation of the absence provisions is a smaller problem, spotlighting will help to draw this out as line managers are more equipped with data to identify patterns.

4.3 Sharon Gallagher highlighted that the NICS needs to defend some of the absence figures in an open way as sickness is a reality but the work which is being done starts to bring out what lies beneath the figures.

*Tracey McCavigan left the meeting.*

## 5. Finance Update

5.1 Gavin Patrick presented the Finance paper, noting that whilst the Department was within budget for 2025/26, the Resource underspend was too high and will be carefully monitored this year. DoF Accounts are nearing completion with no findings to date.

5.2 As DoF has a pressure, there is no central fund for vacancies, but Finance Division will work closely with David Hughes and PRC to manage the vacancy position.

5.3 Members were asked to engage closely with Finance Business Partners on forecasting. Finance Division will work through profiles over the next few weeks to challenge these line by line.

5.4 Gavin advised that the Corporate Governance Control Framework and a document on delegation arrangements are being developed.

5.5 Philip Wales asked about the transformation funding NISRA had submitted bids against; it is dependent upon having a Budget and Gavin will revert to Philip on this.

**Action Point 1: Gavin Patrick to provide Philip Wales with an update on NISRA bids.**

## 6. Governance, Audit and Risk

<u>DoF Business Plan 2025/26</u>

6.1 Members noted the paper on the DoF Business Plan 2025/26.

<u>Corporate Risk Register 2026/27</u>

6.2 Gavin presented an update to the Corporate Risk Register 2026/27, noting some revisions which were agreed. Whilst there was discussion on the removal of risk 2, Neil noted that resourcing may be a risk on individual Directorate risk registers but there is no evidence in relation to achievement of targets which would point to its inclusion at a DoF level.

6.3 Two potential emerging risks were noted:

1. Paul Duffy advised that a readiness survey will be issued to departments 150 days before Integr8 go-live; the results will be fed back to Departmental Board, but this may lead to a risk emerging, particularly in relation to business-as-usual activity.

2. Tony Simpson noted a potential risk in relation to the Peace Plus 2026 expenditure target. His team is working on mitigations and will hopefully know by the next DB meeting if this needs to be escalated.

Information Management Risk

6.4 David presented his paper on the Department's approach to information management risk, noting the Department has well established controls in place and that the primary risk relates to staff behaviours. Staff need to believe that the information they handle is of value – so data breaches are not just the key issue, but also that information is accurate, stored correctly and available. Staff behaviour is directly governed by what is expected of them, so leadership is critical.

6.5 Neil added the need for good document control – policies should state clearly who is responsible for reviewing the policy and when it is due for review. Board members should ensure that reviews are then done.

6.6 Sharon advised she was content with the paper and its conclusions and asked if the Board received a report from the SIRO on compliance? David responded that an Information Assurance paper was brought to the Board in the Autumn but it is not holistic – the Information Assurance Committee is looking at it and how it can be developed. Neil noted this was the same issue for the NICS.

6.7 Paul Duffy raised that many staff are storing documents on their hard-drives and the policy is clear this should not be done. Paul Grocott noted that One-drive should be used for collaboration and the final document then saved to Content Manager. He agreed to issue a staff communication on the planned changes with Digital Workplace along with an update on current policy requirements for creating and storing documents.

**Action Point 2: Paul Grocott to issue a staff communication on Digital Workplace and document management.**

*Tracey McCavigan rejoined the meeting.*

6.8 Philip noted the importance of making visible who the Data Protection Officer is and their contact details, noting that NISRA had created posters for who to call in the event of a cyber incident.

*Colin Woods joined the meeting.*

## ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

## 7. Health and Safety

7.1 David presented the annual Health and Safety Report and priorities for 2026/27. Members agreed the priorities.

*Deborah Brown joined the meeting*

## 8. People Matters

8.1 David provided an update on the People Matters Paper:

a. Draft Departmental Learning and Development Plan: comments or final input should be submitted to Departmental Development Team as soon as possible ahead of publication at the start of July.

b. Temporary Promotions and Agency Workers: there is a slight reduction in the number of TPs but this is not significant. There was discussion on PRC proposals to effect change and agreement that adding another layer to the process was not desirable; rather PRC should highlight challenges for Neil to follow up with members. It was also noted that staff on TP are permanent staff and that TPs are a valid resourcing solution.

**Action Point 3: David Hughes to liaise with Catherine Shannon to develop an improved reporting template for Temporary Promotions, for use at Neil's one-to-one conversations with direct reports.**

c. Annual Leave: a further update on the data will be presented at the October DB, but conclusions cannot be drawn until the end of the leave year. Neil asked members to be firm with their teams that carrying more than nine days forward to the next leave year is not an entitlement and will only be permissible by exception.

d. End-year Reviews 2025/26 & PPA/PDPs 2026/27: completion rates require improvement. Neil noted positive examples of Directorates which showed completions are achievable and again stressed that the Department needs to be tougher on compliance with HR policies. Neil also advised that he will be tracking completions in his one-to-ones with Directors. He is working with David on a small set of HR metrics to measure improvement which will be circulated to members for comment, with a view to having these in place by the Autumn. Jill advised that Olivia Martin is working on a set of indicators for the NICS Board and suggested David should liaise with her.

**Action Point 4: David Hughes to liaise with Olivia Martin on the development of standard HR metrics for improvement.**

e. Partial Retirements: Neil noted the increase in Partial Retirements and the need for assurance on policy compliance. He requested information on this, noting that if this is not available, he may ask Internal Audit to review partial retirements.

**Action Point 5: Catherine Shannon to provide Neil Gibson with a summary of information currently available to provide assurance that partial retirements have been approved in line with policy requirements.**

## ITEMS FOR INFORMATION

## 9. People Strategy

9.1 Jill provided an update on the People Strategy:

a. Year 1 of the People Strategy focused on strengthening governance, putting programme arrangements in place and on key initiatives. In Year 2, the focus is on transition from plans and frameworks and ensuring consistency across departments. A masterplan to 2030 is under development which will provide a clear link between activity and outcomes.

b. A centralised approach to communication and engagement has been agreed by the NICS Board.

c. Further work is required on aligning strategic HR with Integr8, the Global Business Service and the Centre of Excellence.

d. Capacity constraints are a key risk to implementation for both DoF and the other departments. Senior leadership will be required, recognising the People Strategy is about strategic renewal, not a set of disparate HR activities.

9.2 Neil advised members that Jayne Brady will attend the August Departmental Board meeting for the People Strategy and People Matters items.

## 10. Social Value Strategy

10.1 Colin Woods noted that the end of year review of the Social Value Strategy showed strong performance and the remaining actions are on track for completion within the lifetime of the Strategy.

10.2 Neil noted the Minister was delighted that the Department was the first to put a Social Value Strategy in place. He commended the CPD team, including Colin's predecessor, and all in the Department who have contributed in some way to the Department's progress.

## 11. NICS Office Estate Strategy

11.1 Colin advised the NICS Office Estate Strategy was on target to meet 4 of the 6 KPIs and the savings achieved. The remaining two KPIs have been constrained by Marlborough House and Dundonald House, which are now listed buildings.

11.2 Neil noted that the first strategy was heavily orientated towards divestment. The second strategy will look to the future estate, cognisant that there is a limit to how much of the estate can be sold. He added that Colin is bringing forward an Asset Management Plan by the end of this year.

11.3 Sharon reminded members about nominations for the SAMU event being held on Tuesday 30th June.

## 12. DARC Update

12.1 Olwen Laird provided an update on the April DARC meeting; further work is to be undertaken in relation to SEUPB governance. She also reported that DARC had met again on 23rd June and all areas are on track, including the departmental accounts.

12.2 Olwen presented the DARC Annual Report for 2025-26, which members noted provides the necessary assurances on the governance arrangements. Neil added his thanks to Stuart Stevenson, Gavin Patrick, Tracey McCavigan and their teams and to all the members for the work involved in achieving successful end of year reporting.

## 13. Raising Concerns and Complaints Annual Report 2025/26

13.1 Members noted the update on raising concerns and complaints for 2025/26. David highlighted the launch of the new NIPSO Model Complaints Handling Process and that his team has been positively engaging with business areas on their processes.

13.2 Sharon advised that LPS had instigated a review of complaints last year, which has resulted in a new approach to categorisation. NIPSO standards will be implemented but the standard of 5 days may be difficult to achieve.

## 14. Communications Update

14.1 Ciarrai provided an update on Private Office and media activity.

## 15. AOB

15.1 Neil noted that communication had issued from HOCS on SCS Temporary Promotions and on spans and control, which PRC will follow-up.

15.2 Neil advised that greater participation is required in recruitment panels; he fully accepts there are some areas in DoF which cannot offer up volunteers but sitting on panels should be a duty at higher grades.

15.3 Neil noted overall strong departmental performance in most areas and thanked members, noting he is proud to lead the Department. The Minister will be invited to a future DB meeting, well in advance of the election period.

15.4 Catherine thanked the 'DoF Danderers' for their support for the Mega-Miles Challenge, noting that the event raised over £500 for the Charity for Civil Servants.

## 16. Date of Next Meeting

16.1 The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 19th August 2026 in Clare House.

16.2 The meeting closed with no further business.

Heather Caulfield
25 June 2026