

Raising a Concern

Designated Officers' Forum

Minutes

Monday 30 March 2026 ~ online

In attendance: David Hughes (DoF, Chair), Andy McCaw (TEO), Jacqueline McLaughlin (DfE), Donal Moran (DfI), Tara McBride (DoH), David Lennox (DoJ), Sinead Fitzpatrick (DfC), Gary Bennett (DE).

Apologies: Laura McPolin (Jacqueline McLaughlin deputizing); Jeremy Gardner (Gary Bennett deputizing); Amanda McFarland (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. DH to circulate the UKG report on Whistleblowing

Complete

- ii. DH to circulate a revised version of the [Annual Report] commissioning note, for colleagues' consideration and comment.

and

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

Addressed under Item 4

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

Complete, 15 January

- v. DH to organise the next meeting

Complete

3. NIAO Report – *Raising Concerns in the Northern Ireland Public Sector*

3.1. The Forum noted the positive reception of the report published on 20 March.

3.2. It was noted that the degree to which recommendations were relevant to Departments, and the appropriate management responses, would differ. DOs would, therefore, be reporting on this report and its recommendations to their respective Audit and Risk Committees, rather than coordinating a response among the Departments.

4. Annual Report to NICS Board

4.1. It was agreed that this year Departments would report the number of cases handled under the Raising Concern policy, without reference to cases received and transferred into other processes (fraud, grievance, *etc.*).

4.2. It was agreed that the returns would not seek to categorize concerns.

4.3. It was noted that the NICS Board was interested in lessons learnt, and DOs were encouraged to provide instances.

4.4. There was some discussion around the identification of cases that included a breach of the NICS Code of Ethics. The Forum noted that the inclusion of Code of Ethics concerns along with other concerns could be confusing, since a breach was also an HR matter under the Standards of Conduct policy. DH agreed to engage with colleagues in People & OD and NICSHR to consider how best to clarify this matter

ACTION: DH to arrange a meeting with People & OD and NICSHR. Colleagues were welcome to join.

4.5. Members referred to the lessons learnt from the experience of handling cases (as opposed to lessons learnt from the concerns *per se*). In particular, it was

noted that some cases called for a clear decision to accept that a case is closed within the Department, especially where new substantive information is brought forward on successive occasions.

4.6. The Forum agreed that a revised commission would be useful, reflecting this discussion.

ACTION: DH to circulate a revised *pro forma* with a new commissioning memo.

5. Interface with Complaints processes and NIPSO Model Complaints Handling Procedure

5.1. The Forum discussed the forthcoming introduction of the NIPSO Model Complaints Handling Procedure. In some (but not all) Departments, responsibility for complaints and concerns coordination sat together.

5.2. While the model for a cross-departmental policy framework and distinct departmental policies, as for handling concerns, was attractive to some, the position was not precisely parallel in all cases.

5.3. There was some discussion of options for ensuring that all complaints across Departments were handled consistently, including digital solutions.

5.4. No decision was taken to seek a parallel coordinating role.

6. Communications

6.1. No coordinated communications were proposed for this period.

7. Learning & Development

7.1. The Forum discussed the benefit of regular communications to support departmental awareness, especially through the role of the Speak-Up Champion.

7.2. It was agreed that there was a need for training in the work of considering and making decisions on concerns being raised. This was not formal investigation, which was a specialised skill, but would ensure capacity within departments to handle concerns.

7.3. DH agreed to engage with Internal Audit and others to source some training provision in these skills.

ACTION: DH to liaise with IA and NICSHR L&D to source investigative / analytical skills training,

8. AOB

8.1. DH referred to the commitments in the People Strategy to:

- Put in place monitoring and reporting mechanisms to ensure complaints/concerns are managed and dealt with in a timely way.
- Ensure line managers have the required tools to deal with or escalate any concerns.
- Provide our workforce with clear channels to raise concerns in the appropriate manner.

8.2. As far as it referred to concerns as covered by the Policy Framework, members were content that the work had been undertaken in line with these commitments.

8.3. The DfI Complex Cases Committee was discussed, and it was agreed that the draft Terms of Reference would be circulated for information and comment.

ACTION: DM to circulate paper.

9. Date of Next Meeting

ACTION: DH to organise the next meeting in the early Autumn.