

**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
DEPARTMENTAL BOARD**

**Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 11 December 2025 at 14.00hrs  
DoH 5th Floor Conference Room, Castle Buildings**

**Present:** Mike Farrar (Chair)  
David Keenan  
Dr Michael McBride  
Tracey McCaig  
Jim McCooe (NED)  
Maria McIlgorm  
Andrew Magowan (NED)  
Chris Matthews  
Jim Wilkinson

**In attendance:** Philip McClay (Item 6 only)  
Jenny Mahood (Secretariat)  
Leanne Ross (Governance Unit)

**1.0 Opening Remarks, Apologies and Declarations of Interest**

1.1 Introductions were made and the Chair noted that apologies had been received from Aine Morrison, Gillian Reith, Dr Paul Rice and Peter Toogood. There were no new conflicts of interest to declare.

**2.0 Minutes of Board Meeting 23 October 2025**

2.1 The minutes were approved for publication.

**3.0 Matters Arising and Strategic Leadership**

3.1 The Chair referred members to the two actions arising from the October 2025 Board meeting. He noted that the update on Planning Guidance for HSC Trusts was to be discussed later in the meeting. It was confirmed that the review of the Support and Intervention Framework (SIF) was scheduled to

take place after the end of the 2025/26 financial year and that this had been communicated to HSC Trusts. It was therefore agreed that both actions could be closed.

- 3.2 The Chair provided members with an update on the continuing extremely challenging budgetary position and the difficult decisions that have been required. He referred to the outcome of the December monitoring round in which the Department had received £69.3m for HSC pay as opposed to the £100m included in previous projections, and the resultant additional pressure on both the Department's in-year budget and the 2026/27 budget.
- 3.3 The Chair advised that the Department was continuing to work to reduce the in-year budget deficit and drive efficiencies. He noted that there were several commitments which would impact on the 2026/27 budget and referred to the ongoing work on the development of Planning Guidance for HSC Trusts. He confirmed that he planned to discuss the potential for recovery of any DoH 2025/26 overspend over a 3-year budget period with the DoF Permanent Secretary.
- 3.4 The Chair provided members with an update in relation to the high level of flu cases and the associated pressures on the system. There was some discussion around messaging in relation to vaccinations and the wearing of masks in hospital settings. Members also discussed HSC staff uptake of vaccinations and the impact of staff absences on current pressures.
- 3.5 The Chair provided an update on delivery against the HSC Reset Plan, noting the good progress that has been made since publication in July 2025 despite the challenges being experienced across the Department and wider system. He confirmed that the RAG ratings for the Reset Plan delivery commitments had recently been reviewed and updated, and these would be shared with the Non-Executive Board Members.

**Action: HSC Reset Plan RAG updates to be shared with the Non-Executive Board Members.**

#### **4.0 People Survey Update**

- 4.1 Chris Matthews provided an update on the Departmental results from the NICS People Survey 2025 and the development and implementation of the DoH People Plan 2025 to address issues identified in the Survey. He gave an overview of the various DoH initiatives being progressed in 2025/26 under the 3 People Priorities for the NICS, noting that the induction training for new and existing staff had been one of the major successes to date.
- 4.2 It was acknowledged that given the DoH response rate to the NICS People Survey 2025 that this did not represent the views of all DoH staff. It was noted that the refreshed Staff Engagement Forum would be central to meaningful engagement with DoH staff and further intelligence gathering. The need for appreciative inquiry was emphasised to capture learning from those areas which are working well.
- 4.3 A discussion followed around the importance of ensuring that all staff understand how their work contributes to the work on the HSC Reset Plan and to the overall Departmental mission, and how what they do makes a difference. The importance of ensuring that managers at all levels feel part of the leadership team and that they can contribute to change was also emphasised. Chris Matthews advised members that work was ongoing in this area and referred to the session held on 3 December 2025 for DoH managers at G7 and above, "HSC Reset Plan and what this means for us as a department".
- 4.4 There was also discussion around the need to address the causes and not just the symptoms of staff issues, how to ensure manageable workloads, and connecting staff within the hybrid working context.
- 4.5 It was noted that the equivalent report for the Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) would be shared with members, and that the next report will be available in October/November 2026 which will be brought to the Board.

**Action: Secretariat to circulate the 2024 SPPG Pulse Survey Report to Board members.**

## **5.0 NICS HR Update**

5.1 The Chair referred to the NICS HR update and invited members' comments.

There was some discussion about the need to ensure that the key issues of concern are highlighted within the Board updates and that it would also be helpful for trend information to be provided within the reports.

5.2 Members referenced the recurring issues around compliance with performance management and absence management targets and mandatory e-learning completion rates and how improvements can be made. It was noted that it may be in some cases that performance management and absence management activities have been completed but these are not reflected in the compliance figures due to the HR Connect system not having been properly updated. Reference was also made to the impact of long-term sick absence and the need for NICS HR consideration of any other appropriate actions to address this. It was agreed that these matters would be discussed further at the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) meeting.

**Action: SLT to discuss the NICS HR Board Report - including compliance with performance management and absence management targets and mandatory e-learning completion rates, and the format/content of future Board reports.**

**Note: Philip McClay joined the meeting.**

## **6.0 Health Estates Directorate – Proposed Estates Strategy Presentation**

6.1 The Chair welcomed Philip McClay (DoH Director of Health Estates) to the meeting to deliver a presentation on the Proposed Estates Strategy.

6.2 Philip provided a brief overview of the composition and range of responsibilities of the Health Estates Directorate (HED) and set out the key

challenges currently facing HED, including finance, staffing and resources, and delivery of the sustainability agenda. He referred to the critical importance of focusing on delivery of goals and ensuring that the HSC Estate is fit for purpose, the right size, and the right quality within the constraints of the current financial context.

6.3 He provided members with key statistics in relation to vacant properties, unused and underutilised properties, backlog maintenance liability and 3<sup>rd</sup> party leased properties. He set out the proposed plan for the HSC Estate which has a focus on repurposing, refurbishing and reusing existing properties, with new build being the exception rather than the norm. He explained the associated benefits of this approach and referenced the success of the “plan in action” in the delivery of the Ulster Hospital Urgent Care Centre which is delivering real impact for the public and emphasised the future potential of the “plan in action” including cost reductions associated with “rightsizing” of the Estate.

6.4 He concluded by setting out the asks of the Board, including around managing expectations about what is deliverable within the current financially constrained environment and seeking agreement to the proposed change of focus from new builds, to maximising the existing property portfolio. He referred to the need for both a Departmental Plan with input from HED, SPPG and Statisticians, and an Estates Rationalisation Budget noting that this would not necessarily require more funding but a redirection of funding by way of the proposed move away from new build. He also emphasised that difficult decisions would be required, whilst acknowledging political considerations. He commented that NI was not unique in relation to its HSC Estate and referenced the NHS Property Service Survey conducted with NHS leaders in February/March 2025 and the similar issues identified within that exercise.

6.5 There was some discussion about the costs of refurbishing the unused and underutilised parts of the HSC Estate, against the cost of new builds and Philip agreed to provide the Board with further details. There was reference

to the good practice across Trusts in relation to the focus on “going green”. It was noted that currently refurbishment and repurposing of properties was considered the most sustainable approach. There was also some discussion around the impact of the “shift left” agenda in respect of future HSC Estate needs, including the implementation of Neighbourhood Model, and Philip noted that he would like to be involved in early discussions in relation to these work areas.

- 6.6 The Chair thanked Philip for his presentation noting that it had clearly set out the vision and the mandate for change and confirmed the Board’s agreement in principle to the approach, subject to further information, as and when proposals are developed. He noted that that there would be further consideration in relation to capital and Estates within the context of the work on HSC Reset and referred to the NIAO’s ongoing review of Health Estates and the Strategic Investment Board’s work in this area which will also help inform the way forward.

**Action: Philip McClay to provide the Board with more information on cost comparators for bringing the underutilised portion of the HSC Estate into an optimal state (refurbishment/repurposing), and those for new build capital.**

**Note: Philip McClay left the meeting.**

## **7.0 Finance Update**

- 7.1 David Keenan referred members to his paper and provided a detailed update on the funding gap position for 2025/26 following the outcome of the December monitoring round. He confirmed that the Capital to Resource Switch had not been approved by DoF which had increased the scale of the challenge for the Department. He referred members to the continuing work to address the projected end-year deficit and that correspondence will be issued to all ALBs providing them with a proportion of the £69m received via the December monitoring round, setting out the control totals and instructing that any other slippage or reduced requirements are returned to the centre. The Chair noted that despite the remaining challenges, the efforts in reducing

the funding gap from the start of the financial year were to be commended and referred to the significant achievement of the HSC Trusts in this regard.

- 7.2 David provided an overview of the extremely challenging outlook for the 2026/27 budget and updated members on ongoing engagement in respect of the multi-year budget. The Chair noted that he would provide the Departmental Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (DARAC) with an update on the financial position at its meeting on 16 December 2025, including the proposal for a controlled 3-year recovery period in respect of Departmental overspend. He also advised of his ongoing engagement with the Comptroller and Auditor General for NI in respect of the budgetary position.

## **8.0 Update on Planning Guidance for HSC Trusts**

- 8.1 Tracey McCaig provided an update on the development of Planning Guidance for HSC Trusts. She referred to the wide range of engagement which has been undertaken by Michael Bloomfield with HSC Trusts, the Department, and others. She set out the key messages from this engagement and noted the generally positive feedback that has been received. She provided an overview of the challenges and opportunities and the key steps for the development of the Guidance by the end of March 2026.

## **9.0 Support and Intervention Framework Update**

- 9.1 Tracey McCaig provided an overview of the application of the HSC Support and Intervention Framework (SIF) as at 1 December 2025. She advised that there were 50 areas of concern in escalation across the region including 1 at Level 5. She reported that since the last update in October 2025, 5 escalations had been closed, 3 had been de-escalated, and no new escalations have been added. She advised that there continued to be two common areas across all Trusts in relation to: unscheduled care /hospital flow; and safety and quality relating to non-compliance with the timescales for regional procedures for the reporting and follow-up of Serious Adverse Incidents (SAIs). She referred to the progress that had been made to date in these areas.

9.2 She confirmed that there was engagement with Trusts about the planned review of the SIF at the end of the year and noted that there had already been refinement of the process based on Trusts' feedback during the year. She referred to her ongoing work in relation to the SIF's links with the Department's sponsorship activity and capital programme. She reported that the next meeting with the Belfast Trust in relation to the Level 5 concern regarding the Trust's regional Cardiac Surgery Service and the wider culture and leadership matters within the Belfast Trust would be held on Friday 19 December. She confirmed that the Trust has been advised what is required for de-escalation and that an evidence-based approach will be adopted.

#### **10.0 Departmental Risk Register 2025/26 – Quarter 2 Update**

10.1 Chris Matthews provided an overview of the Quarter 2 update on the Departmental Risk Register 2025/26. He noted that the Actual Residual Risk rating for 4 of the 8 risks had been assessed as red, with the remaining 4 assessed as amber. He advised that the Residual Likelihood for Risk 4 had been amended from 5 (Very Likely) to 4 (Likely) since the Board paper had issued and it was noted that this was due to the progress made in relation to outstanding SAIs under the SIF arrangements.

10.2 It was noted that the mitigations for Risk 1 (Resources) were focused on the current financial year, and further consideration was required in respect of mitigations beyond the current year given the challenging budgetary position for 2026/27.

10.3 It was noted that Governance Unit had recirculated Internal Audit's Lessons Learned Report (August 2024) to Grade 3s on 29 October 2025 with a request that they review their governance processes in light of the learning in the report in advance of any audits scheduled to be completed in the remainder of the year. The importance of management reviewing this learning in advance of the remaining audits for 25/26 was emphasised.

- 10.4 It was confirmed that, whilst not explicitly referenced, risks relating to Directed Statutory Functions in respect of Children's Social Care Services were covered within Risks 4 & 6.
- 10.5 Following discussion, it was agreed that Chris Matthews and the Non-Executive Board Members would meet with the Risk 8 Owner to consider how Risk 8 could potentially be reframed in relation to reputational risks, and this would be brought back to the Board for its further consideration.

**Action: Chris Matthews and the Non-Executive Board Members to meet with the Risk 8 Owner to consider how Risk 8 could be reframed in relation to reputational risks and to report back to the Board.**

#### **11.0 Departmental Business Plan 2026/27**

- 11.1 Chris Matthews advised that the Board would receive an update on Quarter 3 of the Reset Plan (Departmental Business Plan) for 2025/26 at its next meeting. He noted the intention to continue with HSC Reset and Financial Sustainability as the core of the Departmental Business Plan for 2026/27 given the ongoing challenges facing the Department. Members indicated that they were content with this approach and referenced the importance of seeking to have the new plan agreed by the start of the new financial year.

#### **12. Papers to Note**

- 12.1 The Chair referred members to the 12 papers which they duly noted:
- **External Consultancy 6 monthly update** –it was agreed that the Board should also receive details on the level of expenditure in respect of the HSC Leadership Centre.
  - **Annual Information Assurance Report to the SIRO for Jan 2024 - Dec 2024.**
  - **2026 Board Schedule** – members agreed the proposed dates.
  - **SPPG - Summary Paper for SPPG Reports.**
  - **SPPG - Delivering Value Through PLICS (Patient Level Information and Costing System) 2023/24 - Second Report.**

- **SPPG – Directed Statutory Functions 2024/25 Overview Report – Children’s Services.**
- **SPPG – Directed Statutory Functions 2024/25 Overview Report - Adult Services.**
- **SPPG – Extra-Contractual Referrals Annual Report 2024/25.**
- **SPPG – General Pharmaceutical Services Governance Annual Report 2024/25.**
- **SPPG – General Ophthalmic Services and Primary Care Optometry Enhanced Services Annual Report 2024/25.**
- **SPPG – Individual Funding Request Scrutiny Committee Activity Report 2024/25.**
- **Integr8 Programme Update** – it was noted that this will be a standing item for future meetings, and future updates will include input from SPPG.

**Action: Secretariat to advise Finance colleagues of the Board’s request for future reports on the level of expenditure in respect of the HSC Leadership Centre.**

### **13. AOB**

13.1 No other items of business were raised.

**The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday 19 February 2026 at 10.00hrs in Castle Buildings.**