DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
DEPARTMENTAL BOARD

Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 18 June 2026 at 14.00hrs
DoH D2 Lecture Theatre, Castle Buildings

Present: Mike Farrar (Chair)
David Keenan
Joanne McBurney
Tracey McCaig
Jim McCooe (NED)
Andrew Magowan (NED)
Chris Matthews
Aine Morrison
Paul Rice
Peter Toogood
Jim Wilkinson

In attendance: Lourda Geoghegan
Donna Ruddy
Irene Culleton
Nikki Kean
Debbie Sherlock (Item 9 only)
Gary McAlorum (Item 9 only)
Tara McBride
Jenny Mahood (Secretariat)

1.0 Opening Remarks, Apologies and Declarations of Interest

1.1 Introductions were made. The Chair welcomed new Board member, Joanne McBurney, who has recently taken up the post of Deputy Secretary of Workforce and Transformation Policy Group, and Lourda Geoghegan who was deputising for Michael McBride. Apologies had been received from

Michael McBride and Maria McIlgorm. There were no new conflicts of interest to declare.

2.0 Minutes of Board Meeting 23 April 2026

2.1 The minutes were accepted as an accurate record and approved for publication.

3.0 Matters Arising and Strategic Leadership

3.1 The Chair referred to the four actions arising from the February and April Board meetings, noting that one had been closed. Following further updates, it was agreed that two actions could be closed, with one remaining open.

3.2 The Chair provided an update on the NI Executive's draft Budget, including ongoing engagement with the UK Government, at both official and political levels, in relation to potential additional support. He referred to the findings of the Fiscal Council Sustainability Report 2026 which supports the case for additional funding for NI based on assessed need. He updated members on the ongoing engagement with HSC Trusts and the Minister on Trusts' savings plans for 2026/27, highlighting the significant challenges associated with achieving the required savings.

Note: Aine Morrison joined the meeting.

3.3 The Chair referred to the launch of the Muckamore Abbey Hospital Inquiry Report earlier that afternoon. Members provided initial reflections on its key findings, including significant concerns in relation to certain contemporaneous issues that had been identified. The imminent publication of the Urology Inquiry Report was also noted. The Chair advised that the Minister would convene a Quality and Safety Summit for Trusts' Chief Executives, Chairpersons and Chairs of their Patient Safety and Quality Committees Trusts and other senior HSC leaders on 30 June, at which he would set out his expectations of Trusts in relation to quality and safety. The Chair also provided an overview of key elements of a package of quality and safety measures which have been progressed, including work on Duty of

Candour legislation, the Being Open Framework, the new Serious Adverse Incident (SAI) Framework, the establishment of Patient Safety and Quality Committees, and ongoing consideration around restorative redress.

Note: Tracey McCaig joined the meeting.

3.4 There was some discussion around the linkages between quality and safety and financial performance, and the Chair suggested that the Departmental Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (DARAC) may wish to consider whether it is content with the balance of information received in relation to financial matters and quality and safety assurances. Tracey McCaig noted that she also wished to consider the routing of SPPG papers to DARAC and the Departmental Board.

3.5 The Chair commented on the progress made across several key elements of HSC Reset and the Department's success in the level of additional investment secured through the Public Service Transformation Bid. He also noted that the National Lottery had committed £30m to the "Together for Families" project which represents the first strategic investment of this kind in Northern Ireland.

3.6 The Chair concluded his update by referencing the recent attacks and intimidation of HSC staff and confirmed that, as part of a review process, he had raised the need for a policy to support the safe transit of HSC staff to and from their workplace in the event of any future recurrence of disorder.

4.0 People Plan Update

4.1 Donna Ruddy provided an end-year update on the DoH People Plan 2025/26, noting that good progress had been achieved across all three priority areas, with a number of actions fully delivered and others either embedded as business as usual or carried forward into 2026/27. Members noted this update.

4.2 Donna gave an overview of the 2026/27 People Plan, highlighting the inclusion of success measures and plans for an in-house Staff Experience Survey in the autumn. Members confirmed they were content to approve the 2026/27 Plan. It was agreed that G5s, G6s and G7s should be offered the opportunity to act as named delivery leads/action owners for individual actions in the 2026/27 Plan, to both strengthen accountability and provide colleagues with an opportunity for leadership development. The importance of ensuring appropriate support for named delivery leads/action owners in relation to convening meetings was highlighted. Donna reminded members that the People Plan is a live document which can be updated at any time.

Action: The POD Team will issue a call out to all G7, G6 and G5 colleagues seeking volunteers to act as the named delivery leads/action owners for individual actions in the 26/27 People Plan.

5.0 People and Organisational Development Committee/Terms of Reference

5.1 Donna Ruddy provided an overview of the revised Terms of Reference (ToR) for the People and Organisational Development (POD) Committee and the rationale for the proposed changes. She referred to the strengthened role and remit of the Committee in providing assurance to the Board on workforce, people and affordability matters.

5.2 The Board approved the ToR and agreed to the formal establishment of the POD Committee as a Sub-Committee of the Board. It was noted that the Board's ToR would also require update to include reference to the POD Sub-Committee.

5.3 The Chair updated members on progress with plans for a Capability and Capacity Review within the Department and noted that it would be helpful for Andrew Magowan to meet with the external reviewer.

Action: Secretariat to update the Board's Terms of Reference to include reference to the POD Sub-Committee.

6.0 Finance Update

6.1 David Keenan referred members to his paper. He provided an overview of the Department's Provisional Outturn Position for 2025/26 noting that this reflected the great efforts of staff across the system throughout the year in delivering £325m of savings. He referred to the Treasury's Reserve Claim funding and the Executive's non-recurrent funding which had also been critical for the Department achieving breakeven.

6.2 He provided an overview on the Resource Budget Position for 2026/27, noting that DoF had issued Contingency Funding Envelopes as the Executive had still to agree a Budget for 2026/27. He set out the position in terms of the expected funding deficit for 2026/27 which was based on the figures in the Finance Minister's most recent Multi-Year Budget Executive Paper. He highlighted the need for additional in-year Executive support, even if 6% savings were achievable across the system and set out the projected impact on the funding deficit if 4% savings were to be delivered instead.

6.3 David noted the Capital Investment Position, including the Provisional Outturn Budget for 2025/26.

6.4 Members noted the updates provided.

7.0 Support and Intervention Framework Update

7.1 Tracey McCaig provided an overview of the application of the HSC Support and Intervention Framework (SIF) as at 8 June 2026. She advised that there were 47 areas of concern in escalation across the region at that date with one common area of escalation across all Trusts, namely *unscheduled care/hospital flow - reducing ambulance handover delays and reducing Emergency Department waiting times, particularly waits over 12 hours and those affecting patients aged over 75*.

7.2 Tracey provided an overview of progress since the SIF was introduced in November 2024, confirming that 44 areas of concern have been addressed and closed, with 38 areas de-escalated and 12 escalated over the same period. She advised that there were 53 live issues on the “watching brief” log which will be reviewed at the end of June in line with the agreed quarterly review process. She provided further details in relation to a number of areas of concern, as well as a comprehensive update on the implementation of the *Release to Rescue Protocol* across Emergency Departments (EDs). She also gave an overview of a range of complementary actions being progressed in relation to ED pressures and hospital flow.

7.3 The Board noted the update provided and the current areas of escalation.

Action: Tracey McCaig to circulate the infographic on the *Release to Rescue* May 2026 Performance to Board members.

8.0 Departmental Business Plan 2026/27

8.1 Irene Culleton provided an overview of the draft Departmental Strategic Business Plan for 2026/27 (the Plan) which had been circulated to Board members for their consideration and approval, prior to the Plan being presented to the Minister for final approval to publish.

8.2 She explained that the Plan will also act as the framework for the delivery of the HSC System Reset for 2026/27.

8.3 She noted that 39 activities had been identified, 12 of which have been assessed as directly supporting the Reset and Financial Sustainability agenda, 4 relating to Workforce, and 5 within Digital, Data and Innovation, in line with the establishment of the three new System Groups. She explained that all remaining activity has been categorised as supporting activity, referred to as Strategic Enablers. She highlighted the inclusion of milestones for each activity which will facilitate in-year progress reporting. She emphasised that deliverability of elements of the Plan is dependent on workforce capacity and will require careful management and prioritisation. She set out her intentions in relation to staff engagement and Departmental communications when the Plan is launched and on progress throughout the year.

8.4 Members welcomed the draft Plan, including its focus on Reset, the inclusion of defined milestones, and the overall quality of its presentation. Members suggested some amendments before the Plan is submitted to the Minister, and it was agreed that final comments should be provided to Irene by close of play on Thursday 25 June.

Action: Board members to provide any final comments/amendments on the draft Departmental Business Plan for 2026/27 to Irene Culleton by close of play on Thursday 25 June 2026.

Note: Debbie Sherlock and Gary McAlorum joined the meeting.

9.0 NICSHR Update on Improvements

9.1 The Chair welcomed Debbie Sherlock (Director of People Services, NICSHR) and Gary McAlorum (Director of Resourcing, NICSHR).

9.2 Debbie provided an overview of recent and planned developments within her Directorate including improvements across Employee Relations (ER), with a particular focus on Absence Management, Discipline, Occupational Health Services (OHS), and Learning and Development (L&D). She emphasised the focus on a proactive, preventative approach in managing sickness absence and the extensive range of wellbeing support available from OHS and Welfare Support Services. She advised that her team could provide support to Departments to design bespoke solutions in relation to absence management, with a focus on providing wraparound support.

9.3 The Chair welcomed the L&D focus on line management and leadership. It was confirmed that the link to the Line Managers' Essential Learning bundle had been circulated to DoH staff and it was noted that staff should be encouraged and supported to use these resources.

9.4 There was some discussion around the current challenges within the HR Connect system in relation to absence management processes and correspondence. Debbie advised that the Integr8 system will be more user friendly and will offer managers greater flexibility in relation to absence management related correspondence.

9.5 In response to a member's query, Debbie confirmed that while some basic AI training is already available for staff, further considerations around an AI education programme for colleagues will be part of the wider NICS Digital Strategy.

9.6 Gary McAlorum provided an update on general service competitions and expected supply for AO, EO2, SO and DP grades. He reported on the recent success of the new Talent Dog recruitment model, initially trialled in the Northwest for AO recruitment, highlighting the rapid progression from recruitment launch to individuals commencing in post. He referred to the recently launched SO competition and noted that NICSHR was seeking panel members at G7/DP grade for interviews in September. He confirmed that there would be engagement with the Department about its declared DP vacancies, before offers are issued, to confirm whether these are affordable.

9.7 Gary emphasised the importance of proactive management of vacancies to better manage demand. He advised members of the launch of a competition dashboard and noted that work is ongoing to develop KPIs and reporting processes. He highlighted that the dashboard will be integral to active competition management and improved accountability, enabling transparency and oversight of competition progress, and identification of potential delays. He also referred to ongoing challenges with HR Connect in respect to specific competitions and outlined his engagement in an escalation process with the contract management team. He also referenced the introduction of Integr8 and the associated impact in terms of streamlining and simplification of future processes.

9.8 The Chair thanked Debbie and Gary for their input.

Note: Debbie Sherlock and Gary McAlorum left the meeting.

10.0 Papers to Note/Cleared Written Procedure Papers

10.1 The Chair referred members to the following papers which they duly noted.

- NICS HR Update
- External Consultancy Expenditure Report (including expenditure on HSC Leadership Centre Associates)
- DARAC Chair's Annual Report 2025/26
- Integr8 Programme Update

10.2 The Chair invited comments from Jim McCooe, DARAC Chair in relation to his Annual Report for 2025/26. Jim referenced the Head of Internal Audit's confirmation of a "Satisfactory" opinion on the Department's governance, risk management, and internal control system for 2025/26, and recognised the collective efforts of Board members and their staff in securing this outcome. He cautioned, however, that there was no room for complacency given the need to address the seven outstanding areas identified in her report. He also referred to the Department's six ALBs which had received "Limited" opinions for 2025/26. He confirmed that DARAC received an update on the Equip Programme at its March meeting, and that Paul Rice would attend the remainder of the Committee's 2026 meetings to keep the Committee assured on developments, implementation risks, and the effectiveness of mitigations.

11.0 AOB

11.1 Tara McBride asked Board members if they would be content for the Secretariat to trial the use of MS Teams transcription to assist with the drafting of Board minutes. The Board confirmed it was content for this to be explored.

The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday 20 August 2026 at 10.00hrs in Castle Buildings.