

**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
DEPARTMENTAL BOARD**

**Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 20 August 2026 at 10.00am
D2 Conference Room, Castle Buildings**

Present: Mike Farrar (Chair)
David Keenan
Dr Michael McBride
Jim McCooe (NED)
Maria McIlgorm
Andrew Magowan (NED)
Jim Wilkinson
Peter Toogood

In attendance: Nikki Kean (Item 4)
Irene Culleton (deputising for Chris Matthews)
Tom Simpson (deputising for Paul Rice)
Phil Rodgers (deputising for Joanne McBurney)
Pamela McIlwrath (Governance Unit)
Stephen Bratty (Secretariat)

1.0 Opening Remarks, Apologies and Declarations of Interest

1.1 Introductions were made and the Chair noted that apologies had been received from Chris Matthews, Aine Morrison, Paul Rice, Joanne McBurney, and Tracey McCaig. There were no new conflicts of interest to declare.

2.0 Minutes of Board Meeting 18 June 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 members to the actions arising from the April and June 2026 Board meetings. It was noted that all actions had been completed and were agreed for closure.
- 3.2 The Chair provided an update on recent political developments and the implications for the Department. The importance of maintaining business continuity, progressing strategic priorities and continuing delivery of the Reset Plan following the appointment of a new Minister was emphasised.
- 3.3 The Chair outlined recent developments relating to patient safety and quality and reiterated that patient safety remained paramount and that action was being taken to strengthen quality and safety arrangements across the health and social care system. The need to deliver efficiencies and improvements without compromising patient safety was also highlighted.
- 3.4 The Chair provided an update on the financial position and ongoing discussions regarding financial support for Northern Ireland. He noted progress in the development of Trust savings plans, together with the further work required to deliver the agreed efficiencies and advised that future financial planning would focus on the longer-term reforms required to support sustainability and delivery of the Reset Plan.
- 3.5 He also referred to progress on the Academic Health and Economic Partnership including growing interest from commercial and investment partners along with the potential to support research, innovation and investment through collaboration between government, academia and industry.

Note: Jim Wilkinson, Dr Michael McBride and Phil Rodgers joined the meeting.

- 3.6 The Chair also provided an update on the development of neighbourhood teams. He noted that all 17 teams were expected to be operational by September 2026 and would support the shift of services from hospital to community settings and delivery of the Reset Plan. Members discussed

governance arrangements, the sharing of best practice and the contribution of voluntary and community sector partners to the neighbourhood model.

- 3.7 The importance of communicating the case for health service reform and improving public understanding of the quality, safety and sustainability reasons for change was highlighted by members. They discussed the challenges associated with public engagement and the need to improve understanding of the rationale for reform, including the role of clinicians in communicating the case for change.

Action: An update on investment and commercial partnership opportunities arising from the Academic Health and Economic Partnership to be brought to a future Board meeting.

Action: An update on the neighbourhood model to be brought to the next Board meeting.

4.0 NICS HR Update

- 4.1 Nikki Kean referred members to the NICS HR Report and provided an update on workforce planning and the development of a new HR delivery model. Progress in moving away from the HR Connect contract was outlined, including the return of key HR functions to the Civil Service. She also highlighted workforce planning requirements over the coming years together with the need to ensure that organisational structures, capability and skills remained aligned to future business needs.
- 4.2 Members discussed opportunities to improve the agility and flexibility of HR processes and considered how workforce information could better support organisational planning and decision-making. The benefits of greater alignment between workforce reporting for the Department and SPPG were also noted.
- 4.3 Members also discussed the forthcoming Capacity and Capability Review, together with workforce issues relating to temporary promotions, recruitment, retention and staff reward and recognition. It was agreed that temporary

promotion should not automatically be the first option considered when filling vacancies and that alternative workforce solutions should be considered where appropriate.

Action: Nikki Kean to engage with the SPPG HR Business Partner to review and strengthen the alignment between SPPG and NICS HR workforce reporting, ensuring that the Board receives a comprehensive overview of significant workforce risks, emerging issues, and workforce trends across the Department and within SPPG.

Action: The Capacity and Capability Review lead to meet with Jim McCooe and Andrew Magowan as part of the review process.

5.0 Finance Update

- 5.1 David Keenan referred members to the Finance Update and outlined the current financial position. In the absence of an agreed budget, planning continued on the basis of available funding assumptions while work progressed to address the remaining funding gap. Progress in the development of Trust savings plans was also outlined and further work to deliver the required efficiencies across the health and social care system was noted.
- 5.2 An update was also provided on pay pressures and discussions regarding additional funding support. It was noted that the Department remained dependent on additional Executive funding to achieve a sustainable financial position.
- 5.3 David advised members of the ongoing accounting issue relating to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. It was noted that the Department continued to work with NIFRS to resolve the matter, although resolution was unlikely before 2027/28.
- 5.4 The Chair noted positive feedback received from the Northern Ireland Office regarding the Department's financial planning and thanked staff for the quality and detail of the work undertaken.

6.0 Support and Intervention Framework Update

- 6.1 The Chair referred members to the Support and Intervention Framework Update. He advised that the framework continued to provide an effective mechanism for the early identification of issues, oversight of common challenges and support for improvement across HSC organisations.
- 6.2 The Chair highlighted the value of the framework in providing visibility of emerging and cross-cutting risks across the health and social care system. Members considered whether common themes arising from risks affecting more than one organisation should be highlighted in future reports.
- 6.3 Members discussed the information provided to the Board and considered how greater assurance could be provided regarding primary care pressures, risks and performance.

Action: Further detail on the common themes arising from risks identified through the Support and Intervention Framework to be provided to the Board.

Action: Tracey McCaig to consider how updates on primary care pressures, risks and performance could be provided to the Board.

7.0 Departmental Reset Business Plan 2026/27 – Quarter 1 Update

- 7.1 Irene Culleton referred members to the Quarter 1 Update on the Departmental Reset Business Plan 2026/27 and advised that the Plan had been published following staff engagement. An overview of progress against 128 milestones across 38 activities was provided. At Quarter 1 end, 6 milestones had been completed, 85 were on track, 36 were rated Amber and 1 milestone was rated Red.
- 7.2 An update was provided on the amber and red rated milestones with staffing and resource pressures, financial constraints, stakeholder engagement and delays in related areas of work identified as the principal causes of non-completion. Members noted the importance of addressing issues within the

Department's control and maintaining focus on delivery of priority commitments.

- 7.3 Members discussed future reporting arrangements, including the presentation of RAG status, confidence levels and reasons for delay, to provide greater visibility of emerging delivery risks. The importance of ensuring that resources remain aligned to agreed priorities was also highlighted.

Action: Irene Culleton to refine the structure, presentation and reporting of future Business Plan updates.

8.0 Departmental Risk Register 2026/27 – Quarter 1 Update

- 8.1 David Keenan referred members to the Quarter 1 Departmental Risk Register and outlined changes to the Department's risk profile since fourth quarter of 2025/26. Increased financial and workforce-related risks were highlighted, together with the factors contributing to the revised assessment of departmental risks.
- 8.2 Members discussed statutory obligations at risk of non-delivery, mitigation measures and the importance of contingency planning where key assumptions may not be realised. Members considered whether statutory risks should be more clearly identified through risk reporting.

Action: Further detail to be provided on the statutory obligations at risk of non-delivery referred to under Risk 2.

9.0 Papers to Note / Written Procedure Papers

- 9.1 The Chair referred members to the following papers, which were duly noted:
- Integr8 Programme Update;
 - Draft Minutes of the Departmental Audit and Risk Assurance Committee meetings held on 25 June 2026 and 7 July 2026;
 - SPPG year-end position for the 2025/26 Safety and Quality Annual Workplan and the revised 2026/27 Safety and Quality Framework and Annual Workplan;

- Annual Information Assurance Report to the Senior Information Risk Owner for January to December 2025; and
- Programme for Government Update.

9.2 Members discussed the Integr8 Programme Update and agreed that future reports should provide a clearer account of the principal risks and issues requiring Board attention. Members noted the importance of ensuring that reports highlight areas of concern as well as progress achieved.

9.3 The Safety and Quality papers were considered, including arrangements for capturing and sharing learning across the health and social care system. Concerns were raised regarding PHA's role in this work and the need for PHA and SPPG to work collaboratively to support regional learning.

9.4 The Annual Information Assurance Report and Programme for Government Update were noted. Members commented on information assurance training completion rates, noting that completion levels were low for some staff grades.

9.5 The Chair confirmed that no written procedure papers had been issued since the previous Board meeting. Members noted that the updated Board Terms of Reference had been published on the Department's website and intranet.

10.0 AOB

10.1 Members were advised of a quality improvement project examining how staff experience their work within the Department. The findings would be shared with the Board when the project was complete.

10.2 There was no other business.

The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday 22 October 2026 at 10.00am in D2 Conference Room, Castle Buildings.