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DEPARTMENTAL MANAGEMENT BOARD MINUTES
WEDNESDAY 13 MAY 2026

In Attendance:	Grainia Long	Permanent Secretary (Chair)
	John Greer	Deputy Secretary for Corporate Services
	John Smith	Deputy Secretary for Communities, Place & Local Government
	Linsey Farrell	Deputy Secretary for Operational Delivery
	Cherrie Arnold	Acting Deputy Secretary for Work and Health
	Paul Price	Acting Deputy Secretary for Housing & Sustainability
	John McCord	Obo Acting Deputy Secretary for Engaged Communities
	Dale Ashford	Non-Executive Board Member
	Trevor Connolly	Director of Governance
	Olga Beagon	Director of Finance
	Tracy Johnston	Director of Machinery of Government
	Julie Nelson	Item 9
	Angus Kerr	Item 10
	Eamon O'Kane	Item 11
	Emma Neill	Observer ECG
	Joy Carey	Observer ECG
	Heather Duff	Secretariat
	Laura Deighan	Secretariat

Apologies	Iain Greenway	Acting Deputy Secretary for Engaged Communities
	Sharon O'Connor	Non-Executive Board Member

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Welcome and Apologies

Grainia welcomed all attendees, including observers Emma Neill and Joy Carey from Engaged Communities Group.

Apologies were received from Sharon O'Connor and Iain Greenway. John McCord attended the meeting on behalf of the Engaged Communities Group

Trevor informed the Board he would be leaving the meeting early.

Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest were declared.

Minutes of Previous Meeting and Actions

The minutes of the April meeting were reviewed and agreed. Action points were reviewed and updated.

Stewardship Report

John Greer introduced the paper, noting his thanks to Olga, Kathy, their teams and the relevant business areas for their ongoing contributions and continued work in this area.

Olga provided an overview of the Department's financial position at 31 March 2026. The 2025-26 provisional outturn indicates a total Resource DEL easement of £3.1m, well within tolerance at 0.3%, and a total Capital DEL easement of £1.6m (0.5%).

She noted that the forward financial outlook remains uncertain, with the 2026–27 NI Budget yet to be agreed and a significant funding gap persisting – based on the draft budget. In the absence of a confirmed Budget, the Department is planning on the basis of constrained indicative allocations provided by the DoF Permanent Secretary through contingency planning envelopes.

The Department continues to face considerable financial challenges. Work is ongoing to identify savings options, reprioritise capital activity, and manage funding allocations. Engagement with the Department of Finance continues to support the delivery of a balanced and sustainable budget.

Board members discussed the scale of the budget reduction outlined within the contingency planning envelope and the anticipated timeframe for receipt of the final budget allocation. It was noted that discussions are ongoing with the Executive Leadership Team, and options will be presented to the Minister in the coming week. The potential implications for finalising the Business Plan were also considered.

John Greer outlined the workforce and people elements of the report, highlighting ongoing challenges in recruitment and constraints in scheduling recruitment competitions. While challenges remain, he noted early signs of improvement in supply. He also provided an update on performance management and progress against the People Strategy.

The Board discussed recruitment challenges further, including the need to align activity with Workforce Policy.

Grainia noted the progress being made in recruitment and commended the strong leadership culture across the Department.

The Board approved the Stewardship Report, subject to the agreed amendment.

Departmental Business Plan

Trevor Connolly presented the Quarter 4 report on performance against the 2025–26 Departmental Business Plan, noting that 28 activities achieved green status and 13 were rated red.

He outlined the proposed timeline for development of the 2026–27 Business Plan. A draft has been endorsed by Deputy Secretaries; however, finalisation will depend on the outcome of Executive and Ministerial Budget decisions. Deputy Secretaries will then have a further opportunity to refresh inputs to ensure deliverability and alignment with Ministerial priorities. The final Plan will be agreed with the Permanent Secretary, Deputy Secretaries and the Minister, and will return to the Board for final approval prior to publication.

The Board discussed performance against the 2025–26 Plan, as well as the content and development of the 2026–27 Plan in the context of Budget uncertainty, including consideration of business-as-usual activities, projects and workstreams.

The Board noted the Quarter 4 performance update.

Policy and Strategy Sub-Committee Chair's Report

Linsey spoke to this paper and provided an update on the work undertaken by the Policy and Strategy Sub-Committee during 2025–26. The Committee confirmed that strategic and policy delivery across the Department has been adequate and effective.

A draft Terms of Reference for 2026–27 will be circulated to PSSC members and, subject to agreement, will be presented to the Board in June for approval. It was noted that key areas of focus for 2026–27 will include the continued development of policy and legislation skills within the Department, alongside strengthened partnership working with PRSC to support effective succession planning.

The Board discussed the need to build depth and resilience in policy capability across the Department, including opportunities for cross-departmental collaboration and alignment with the Job Family approach.

The Board noted the PSSC Annual Report and the assurance provided to the Accounting Officer.

Departmental Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Chair's Report

Dale spoke to this paper and provided a brief update on the work undertaken by DARAC during 2025/26. He highlighted key areas of ongoing focus for the Committee, including budget, finance and resourcing pressures; ALB partnership working and oversight; levels of fraud and error in benefit expenditure; and the Integr8 Programme. These areas will continue to be monitored over the coming year.

Dale also conveyed Sharon's thanks for the support received across the Department.

The Board discussed capacity concerns in internal audit, with the loss of staff and noted the emerging risk. Grainia emphasised the need for a more consistent approach to ALB oversight across departments.

The Board approved the DARAC Annual Report for 2025/26.

Contracts and Consultancy update

Trevor spoke to this paper, providing an update on the current position of contracts and consultancy within the Department, including an overview of SIB staff assignments. He noted that the report is based on data derived from Account NI reporting and does not include ALBs. Trevor confirmed that no risks or issues have been identified requiring escalation to the Board.

Trevor advised that the current Strategic Partnership Framework is due to conclude on 17 July 2026. Approval was secured from ELT in March 2026 to commence procurement of a new framework, with development of the Outline Business Case at an advanced stage.

He also provided an update following a due diligence exercise within ECG in relation to NI Commissioner approvals for two SIB roles.

The Board discussed SIB roles and associated approvals. There was a discussion around PWC external consultancy spend and Pathways to Work funding.

The Board noted the current position of contracts and consultancy within the Department and agreed the continued need for SIB assignments.

Fraud & Error

Julie spoke to this paper and provided an update on the Department's fraud and error performance in 2025. The total rate of overpayments has decreased due to customer fraud falling and customer and official error remaining static. Julie highlighted a significant improvement in the overall Universal Credit customer fraud and error and that financial accuracy has increased to 99.4%. Julie provided an update on the availability of DWP fraud and error figures and a timeline for publication.

The Board recognised the positive figures and discussed the need for additional funding in this area and further engagement with DWP. The publication of the fraud and error figures was discussed; Julie will meet with Minister and SpAd to discuss publication.

The Board were content to note the year end benefit fraud and error results and thanked Julie and the team.

Final Climate Action Plan Residential Buildings 2023-2027 and Departmental CAP – Presentation

Angus delivered a presentation on the Departmental Climate Action Plan, outlining key provisions of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, including the Net Zero target, carbon budgeting framework, public body reporting requirements, sectoral plans, and the appointment of an independent NI Climate Commissioner.

He provided an update on the Residential Buildings sector, highlighting the three core themes of the CAP sectoral focus: reducing energy consumption, increasing the use of low-carbon heating options, and improving standards. An update on the three carbon budgets was also presented.

Angus outlined key challenges associated with CAP 1, including the need for effective cross-departmental coordination, stakeholder engagement, and funding requirements.

The Board noted that a long-term Climate Change Strategy is under development to guide future Action Plans. Work to secure DMB approval of the new framework is planned for 2026/27 and is reflected as an action and key milestone within the draft Departmental Business Plan. The CAP team is also progressing the collation of cross-departmental data and drafting the 2025/26 Sustainability Report.

The Board discussed the challenges of achieving the 48% emissions reduction target with a constrained budget, emphasising the need for investment, skills development, and policy certainty. Alignment with Ministerial priorities, including fuel poverty, was also considered.

The Board discussed the presentation and key milestones. Grainia thanked Angus and his team for their ongoing work on the Climate Action Plan.

Strategic Workforce Planning Presentation

Eamon delivered a presentation on the Department's approach to workforce planning, emphasising the importance of developing a plan aligned to the NICS People Strategy and establishing clear people priorities. He outlined the rationale for this work, focusing on the need to respond to changing and long-term demands while building a sustainable foundation for future delivery.

Key workforce data highlighted increasing headcount alongside constrained supply, with particular pressures across DWP areas, general service grades and specialist roles. Ongoing challenges were noted in relation to vacancies, backfill and temporary promotions, with specific attention drawn to long-term vacancies and the need to assess their continued requirement.

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Eamon outlined key principles underpinning the approach, including clear TLT ownership, regular monthly review, and the development of manager toolkits to support informed decision-making and the identification of critical roles.

The Board discussed vacancy pressures across the Department and thanked Eamon for the presentation.

AOB

Grainia thanked Emma and Joy for attending the meeting as observers. They provided feedback following the session and expressed their appreciation to the Board for the opportunity to attend.

The Board noted the Health & Safety update and the DfC Portfolio of Programmes and Projects paper.

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