MINUTES OF THE JOINT STANDARDS COMMITTEE MEETING HELD IN CONFERENCE ROOM 3, CASTLECOURT ON 4th MARCH 2026 10.30AM

Marie Cavanagh		Chairperson
Matt Cole		Independent Member
Mark Morrison		Acting Deputy Director Debt Management and Benefit Security
John Mcilwaine		Acting Deputy Director Child Maintenance Service NI and SAU
Rosheen McCrory		Universal Credit Operations
Karen McCann		Working Age Services
Katrina McAlea		Internal Audit
Fionnuala Weir	Minutes	Benefit Security Support

1. Welcome and Apologies

Marie Cavanagh welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked them for their attendance. Apologies were registered for Owen McCloskey, Julie Nelson, Ruairí O'Connell, Ann Meeke, Bernie McCafferty and Michael Woods. Karen McCann attended for Ann Meeke and Katrina McAlea attended for Michael Woods.

2. Conflict of Interest

Marie asked the Committee to look at the current agenda and declare any conflict of interest. None were declared.

3. Minutes of the last meeting 11.12.2025

The updated minutes of the last meeting 11.12.2025 were agreed as an accurate record.

Owen sent a note via email following on from minutes from the previous meeting. He asked if a standing action point should be added to future meetings in relation to the Department's proposals for an 'Incorrectness plan'. Craig advised that the term 'Incorrectness plan' relates to the Department's 2024/25 business plan to improve quality and accuracy and so the term 'Incorrectness plan' in fact relates to this business plan. Rosheen advised that the Department now has a Quality Management Framework in place to ensure accuracy. Rosheen noted that the Department's use of terminology in referring to the business plan as an 'Incorrectness plan' is a poor choice of words as this has created ambiguity. Marie noted therefore that the term 'Incorrectness plan' is an old expression for the Department's business plan; this has now changed to the Quality Management Framework. Matt noted that the Department may have additional data for creating the Framework which could be supplied to the Committee. Rosheen advised that the Framework is currently being formulated for publication.

4. Action points from Standards Committee meeting 11.12.2025

Action point 12/21 (ongoing) : The Committee will check if any improvements can be made to PIP once the Green and White papers are available.
Ruairí provided the following update via email regarding the Timm's Review of PIP: DfC operations and policy continue to have regular calls with the Review team as they develop their engagement strategy and we will be pushing for NI stakeholders to be included as no NI representative was included on the Steering Group unfortunately. Ruairí advised he will update further at the next meeting.
Matt noted that the Timms review is GB specific and it is unclear how much of the Green paper will apply directly to NI however the NI Executive will have scope to use their discretion as to how legislation would apply to NI. The Committee agreed to keep the Action point open whilst the Review in ongoing as there may be additional engagement prior to the publication of the Review in the Autumn.

Action point 2/24 : Owen asked was there any particular scrutiny of the management information process in relation to migrated cases and should there be a separate sample to look at this.
Rosheen advised that she and Craig Dempsey held a meeting with the Committee in February. Rosheen relayed the information provided to the Committee during this meeting:
A "deep dive" of a sample of migrated Universal Credit (UC) cases was completed to gain further information about these cases. For this deep dive exercise, checks were completed on 300 UC cases which fell within the following parameters: 1) UC cases which had migrated from ESA and 2) cases where the first Assessment Period ended in either September, October or November. (100 cases from each month were checked). This sample of 300 cases accounted for 1.2% of the total amount of ESA claims which migrated from ESA to UC during the period.
Of the 300 cases checked, 298 were found to be financially accurate, which is an accuracy rate of 99.3%, and ties in with the SAU results which are independent.
Of the 300 cases checked, 26 potential errors were found. These potential errors were for a number of reasons, for example the claimant had declared something

different from their ESA claim or the case worker hadn't taken required action to set an appointee review on a case. These cases were referred to the case worker to check and investigate.

<u>In respect of the Transitional Payment (TP) aspect in each case:</u>

All 300 cases had a Transitional Payment. 298 had a TP completed at the time of the check. 2 cases had been awaiting the completion of a TP calculation due to outstanding action by claimants, both of which have now been followed up and TP calculated.

<u>In respect of the MGP1 aspect in each case</u>**:**

257 cases received the MGP1 in AP1 (85.7%), 42 cases received the MGP1 after AP1 (14.0%) and in 1 case no MGP1 had been received (0.3%).

Of the 42 cases which received the MGP1 after AP1, 5 cases (12%) had a change to the benefit award amount once the MGP1 was received, the remaining 37 cases (88%) had no change.

Rosheen acknowledged there had been an issue with the MGP1 process but that it had been speedily rectified by end September 2025.

The Committee agreed they were happy with this information provided. Matt noted that the trends in errors found in Rosheen's exercise matched what he has encountered through his work. The Committee noted that during the meeting with Rosheen and Craig they had queried why the 5 cases which received MGP1 after AP1 were not treated as an error and they had also requested further information in relation to 'Safe payments' of UC. Rosheen confirmed she is currently obtaining responses for these issues and will then feed back to the Committee. The Committee agreed they were happy with this and Action point closed. The Committee agreed that if any queries arise from the information Rosheen provides then a new Action Point can be raised. **Action point closed.**

Action point 3/25 : President of the Appeals Tribunal report. The Tribunal's report and the DfC report have produced differing figures in respect of decision-making accuracy. Julie advised it would be useful to prepare a response from the department in respect of the issue.

Rosheen advised David Tarr (Director of SSPLD) has provided the following response : SSPLD will commit to consider the need for issuing clarification on the differences between the reported standards of decision-making in response to future OPAT reports.

Rosheen noted that as the most recent OPAT report was published in February 2025, issuing a departmental response at this time would not be appropriate. Matt recognised the need to address the conflicting figures in the two reports. Mark noted that the Tribunal's report which was published in February 2025 was for the period 2021/22 and so these figures would not be comparable to the most recent DfC Report. Marie noted that TAS reports have consistently reported a similar picture to the 2021/22 report. Matt noted it is important to recognise the sample of cases used for each report is very different. Agreed to close Action point and Rosheen will follow up with SSPLD for confirmation that they will share their comments on future OPAT reports with the Standards Committee prior the comments being published. **Action point closed.**

Action point 8/25 (ongoing) : Owen noted that there is no data for UC in the clearance times figures. The committee requested if UC clearance times can be included in the clearance times data.

Rosheen noted that the calculation of entitlement to UC can be complex and multi-faceted with entitlement changing (both increasing and decreasing) as more information is made available throughout the claim process. The payment timeliness data is therefore Management Information which is subject to change over time. In contributing to the payment timeliness figures, this is not just input from UC service centres but also from the front offices, third parties and claimants themselves. In general, where payment has either not been made or not been made in full, this is because of incomplete information or information received just after the assessment period has ended. This data is taken from operational data systems and is not intended for publication, the data itself is not quality assured to the standard of published official statistics. Rosheen advised UC clearance times will begin to be collected for the Committee from April onwards and she will confirm with the team who are collecting the data whether this information will be available in time for the next quarterly meeting in June.

Action point 9/25 : Owen noted that in the DfC report there are a significantly higher number of Supersessions being checked than New Claims. Julie noted that

New Claims may include more decisions than just the Initial decision and asked if Gary McGouran would be able to obtain clarification of what is checked in New Claim cases which Gary confirmed he will do.

Gary provided an update via email to advise that SAU checks new/repeat claims, revisions, and supersessions against outcome decisions made within the previous 12 months. An outcome decision awards or refuses benefit. The categoriser reviews whether the Decision Maker (DM) correctly addressed four areas: Evidence (Whether all evidence available at the time was considered and if evidence was sufficient to make a proper decision), Determination of Questions, (All relevant questions arising from the evidence were identified and addressed and No issues remained unresolved before applying the law), Findings of fact (Correct findings were made based on the information and evidence held) and Interpretation & Application of the Law (Legislation and case law were applied correctly to the established facts).

Owen sent a follow up email to ask Gary: In UC cases, why are New Claim cases proportionately less than supersessions and whether this is correctly reflecting the proportion of managed migration decisions?

Gary provided the following information in response to this: The SAU methodology is designed to provide a measurement of the Universal Credit (UC) caseload as a whole. As part of this approach, the selection of cases is carried out without any stratification or targeting of specific claim types. This means that all cases within the UC population have an equal chance of being selected, regardless of factors such as claim age, claimant characteristics, or decision type.

Because the methodology does not incorporate stratification, it does not differentiate between categories such as new claims, change-of-circumstance/supersessions, or ongoing claims with fluctuating entitlements. The sample is therefore representative of the overall UC caseload rather than any sub-group within it. While this supports an unbiased assessment of general accuracy across the system, it does limit the ability to analyse accuracy or performance for specific types of cases that may be of operational or policy interest.

It is also worth noting that for decision making accuracy (DM) checks, a new claim is one made within the previous 12 months where no supersession or review has occurred. However, many UC claims have fluctuating circumstances, leading to

multiple decisions within that period. Although these claims are still new to UC, the DM check must assess the most recent decision, meaning the case is recorded as a supersession.
John added that because cases are picked at random by SAU, a specific type of case cannot be selected for checking. Marie noted that this means that a certain volume of one type of case cannot be selected for checking. John advised that it will always be very likely that a new UC case will have a supersession in its first year. Matt recognised that because SAU go back 12 months and look at the most recent decision in a case this means that a UC case is very likely to have a supersession in its first 12 months. Committee agreed they are happy with the response provided. **Action point closed.**

Action point 10/25 : Owen noted that in the DfC Report there was 1 error found in the Appeals cases checked. He asked if further detail could be provided about this case. Gary confirmed he will obtain this information.
Gary provided the following information via email in response to provide further details of the Appeals case. He advised that a discrepancy was identified where the entitlement date in the award letter differed to the appeal paper. In addition, the award letter confirmed entitlement to both Daily Living and Mobility whereas the appeal papers states there was entitlement to Standard Daily Living only.
The Committee confirmed they were happy with this response. **Action point closed.**

Action point 11/25 (ongoing) : Owen asked if there is any way the UC system could be improved so that it would recognise potential errors in the RTI feed used to calculate the UC award; for example if it could identify when a customer has received two wages in one month when they normally only receive one wage per month.
Rosheen advised Bernie McCafferty is working on this but there are no updates as yet. Agreed to keep action point open for update at the next meeting.

Action point 12/25 (ongoing) : Waivers: Owen raised a concern that vulnerable UC customers may not have the capacity to request a waiver. Julie advised she will check the guidance on mental capacity has gone out to decision makers.

Agreed to keep Action point open for update at subsequent meeting.

Action point 13/25 (ongoing) : Waivers: Marie asked if it would be possible to include a reference to waivers in the Annual Report on Decision Making and Financial Accuracy? Julie advised she will seek advice from the relevant teams to find out if waivers can be referred to in the Annual Report.
Agreed to keep Action point open for update at subsequent meeting.

Action points from meeting with the Voluntary Sector

Action point 11 (ongoing) : Owen raised the issue regarding the use of algorithms in decision making within DfC. They should be disclosed as it may have an impact on decision making and have in built bias.
Marie advised that in the Committee's visit to Child Maintenance Service it was noted that a number of automated decisions using AI are being made in relation to Mandatory Reconsiderations. John advised he has sent an email to query the legislation surrounding this. Marie asked John if he could forward this to the Committee which John confirmed he will do. John advised he will also obtain background information about this process for the Committee's next site visit to CMS. The Committee agreed that the development of AI for use in the Department is an ongoing issue and so agreed to keep the Action point open.

Action point 3/25 : Bridget will give details of cases with the issue of an overpayment of ESA being deducted from UC payments to Owen.
Owen has advised Briget has not provided case details related to this. Agreed to close Action point and that a new Action point could be raised in the future if required. **Action point closed.**

5. Managing Migration

Marie explained that the Committee are looking at the impact of the operational issues of the migration of legacy claims onto Universal Credit.

No further updates related to this Action point. Item remains on agenda for next meeting.

6. CMS Quarter 3 Report: 1 October 2025 – 31 December 2025

John introduced the CMS report for the period 1 October 2025 to 31 December 2025. The target for 2025/26 is to achieve a Monetary Value of Error (MVE) of less than 3%; At the end of Quarter 3 the MVE was 2% for the Year to Date and so is on target; 458 cases were checked in the period, 47 decisions were inaccurate leading to an MVE of 2%. Page 5 of the report provides a breakdown of this quarter: 188 cases were checked in this quarter, 22 errors were found which was an MVE of 3%. The MVE for Q3 is therefore higher than across the year. Marie noted that, in comparison to September 2025 when the MVE was 7.1%, the MVE has been considerably lower in the 3 months in this quarter.

Appendix 1 shows a breakdown of the areas of error in the Year to Date. It shows that the majority of errors were in Income and Household. John recognised that income is a complex area for decision makers and is one in which they are experiencing issues. John advised he met with the training department in relation to this and they have agreed that there will be increased training provided to staff. Additional checks will also be completed to pick up on these errors.

Matt noted that Income is a recurrent area of error, indicated by Appendix 8 which compares the errors with last year's figures. John recognised that this is an area they are seeking to make improvements on. He advised that an experienced checker also left the checking team recently and the replacement staff member was found to be ineffective and so was taken out of the checking team. This issue has also impacted on accuracy. John advised that the Service are taking action to highlight to staff the importance of accuracy; promoting this in the 'Quality Matter's bulletin which is issued to staff. They are also looking into the length of training and consolidation provided to staff.

In relation to decision making in this quarter: 79% of cases checked were decision making accurate. This is a slight decrease in decision making accuracy when compared to the Year to Date figure in which there is a decision-making accuracy rate of 81%.

7. DfC Quarter 3 report: 1 July 2025 – 30 September 2025

Mark presented the DfC Quarter 3 report for the period 1 July 2025 to 30 September 2025 to the Committee.

Decision Making

All 6 benefits achieved the benchmark set, with all 6 exceeding the benchmark. The one error found was with Universal Credit. The area of error for this was *finding of fact* (related to another benefit being incorrect).
Rosheen advised that, as had been discussed at the previous quarterly meeting in December, the UC benchmark has now been increased to 95%.

Financial Accuracy

For financial accuracy all 6 benefits monitored exceeded the benchmark set.

Overpayments / Appeals

Overpayments: A total of 62 cases were examined and 4 errors raised resulting in an overall standard of 94%. The areas of error were *evidence* (2 errors 50% - relating to the decision to recover being incorrect and the amount of the recoverable overpayment being incorrect – 1 each) and *findings of fact* (2 errors 50% - both relating to the amount of the recoverable overpayment being incorrect).

Appeals: A total of 39 cases were examined and 1 error was raised resulting in an overall standard of 97%. The error related to the failure to summarise all the facts of the case including disputed facts.

Matt asked if a breakdown could be provided of the types of benefits which made up the 62 overpayment cases and the 39 appeals cases which were examined? Mark confirmed he will obtain this information for the Committee.

New Action point 1/26: Mark will seek to obtain a breakdown of the types of benefits which made up the overpayments and appeals cases examined in the DfC Report.

8. Clearance times

Marie noted that UC clearance times will hopefully be available at the next quarterly meeting in June, as discussed in Action point 8/25.

Matt noted that PIP is still not within clearance times targets. Marie recognised there has been some move towards reaching the target when compared with the last set of figures received as it has moved from 5 weeks away to now 4 weeks away from the target clearance time. Karen noted that JSA is improving as it has moved from 0.7 days away to 0.4 days away from the target clearance time. Marie also noted that DLA has improved its clearance time as it has moved from 7 days away to 3 days away from its target.

9. Standards Committee Meetings/Visits

NIAO 27.11.2025

The minutes of the Committee's meeting with NIAO were agreed.

10. Any other Business

None.

Marie thanked everyone for their attendance.

The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday 18th June 2026.