Department for
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DEPARTMENTAL MANAGEMENT BOARD MINUTES
WEDNESDAY 24 JUNE 2026

In Attendance:	Grainia Long	Permanent Secretary (Chair)
	John Greer	Deputy Secretary for Corporate Services
	John Smith	Deputy Secretary for Communities, Place & Local Government
	Julie Nelson	Obo Deputy Secretary for Operational Delivery
	Michelle Furphy	Obo Acting Deputy Secretary for Work and Health
	Paul Price	Acting Deputy Secretary for Housing & Sustainability
	Iain Greenway	Acting Deputy Secretary for Engaged Communities
	Dale Ashford	Non-Executive Board Member
	Sharon O'Connor	Non-Executive Board Member
	Trevor Connolly	Director of Governance
	Olga Beagon	Director of Finance
	Tracy Johnston	Director of Machinery of Government
	Eamon O'Kane	Item 5, 6 and 7
	George Sampson	Item 10
	Caitlin McElhone	Observer CSG
	Gemma Wallace	Observer CSG
	Heather Duff	Secretariat
	Laura Deighan	Secretariat

Apologies	Cherrie Arnold	Acting Deputy Secretary for Work and Health Group
	Linsey Farrell	Deputy Secretary for Operational Delivery Group

Welcome and Apologies

Grainia welcomed all attendees, including observers Caitlin McElhone and Gemma Wallace from Corporate Services Group.

Apologies were received from Linsey Farrell and Cherrie Arnold. Julie Nelson and Michelle Furphy attended on their behalf.

Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest were declared.

Minutes of Previous Meeting and Actions

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

Stewardship Report

Olga provided an overview of the Department's current financial position. Olga highlighted the financial uncertainty due to the absence of an agreed 2026–27 Budget, with the Department operating under a Vote on Account (which provides c.45% of 2025-26 cash and resources) that is projected to be exceeded by late summer/early September, creating risks around financial control, audit compliance and service delivery. Indicative Contingency Planning Envelopes are insufficient to meet current forecasts, requiring urgent Ministerial decisions on savings, funding allocations and priorities. Immediate pressures include the expiry of Quarter 1 funding for ALBs, the need to approve Quarter 2 allocations to maintain services, and delays to capital investment impacting Programme for Government delivery. The Department is mitigating risks through strict financial and workforce controls, but sustainability remains at risk without timely Budget agreement and decisions on savings and resource allocation.

Board members discussed the continued uncertainty in the absence of an agreed budget. Amber and Green savings options have now been approved by the Minister, with further detailed consideration to be taken forward offline. Minister has confirmed he is content with quantifiable savings. Controls are already in place, including within Work and Health. There is no single deadline for savings to be implemented, timelines vary across departments amid ongoing engagement with HM Treasury; however, wider UK Government uncertainty may delay major decisions. The expectation of a 5% affordability control over workforce decisions was acknowledged, though it was emphasised that delivering this in practice is complex and risks unsustainable impacts. While the Department is seen as proactive and committed to moving quickly, the need to fully understand the consequences of proposed measures before implementation was highlighted.

The Board approved the Stewardship Report.

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

Civil Contingencies Framework Update

John Greer gave a brief background to this paper before introducing Eamon to speak on it.

Eamon outlined that the Department's strategic approach to preparing for, responding to and recovering from civil contingencies, aligned to the wider Northern Ireland Civil Contingencies Framework and multi-agency arrangements. The Framework reinforces that civil contingencies is a whole Department responsibility, supported by governance structures, defined roles, and the development of Group level playbooks to enable effective operational delivery.

Eamon noted that the frequency and complexity of incidents has increased in recent months, including severe weather events and civil unrest. These incidents have highlighted the need for faster, more coordinated responses, greater organisational depth and awareness, and shared ownership across all Groups rather than reliance on specialist contingency teams. Alignment with NICS arrangements is essential. He also acknowledged that the current document (c.80 pages) is overly detailed and will be refined to improve usability.

The Board noted planned next steps, including engagement with Learning & Development to support business areas in developing their own playbooks, strengthening capability across the Department, and embedding DMB oversight within the Framework.

In discussion, members raised a number of operational considerations arising from recent events:

- The need to strengthen the displacement protocol, particularly in light of accommodation shortages during civil unrest; alternative options such as the hospitality sector may need to be explored, as community/civic centres are only suitable for short-term use.
- The importance of stronger relationships with communities and partners to support a more joined-up response, including issues such as access to medication. Eamon advised that this would be considered at a cross-departmental level through CGNI.
- Challenges around how “clinically vulnerable” is defined and applied in practice.
- Recognition that localised incidents may not trigger formal civil contingencies arrangements but still require an effective local response.
- The need for early and clear communications, particularly for public-facing services such as Jobs and Benefits Offices, and an understanding that localised events do not necessarily require region wide service closures.

Grainia thanked Eamon for the presentation and emphasised the importance of maintaining Board visibility of this area, requesting that civil contingencies be brought to DMB on at least an annual basis.

DMB approved the Framework and agreed the proposed next steps.

PRSC Chair's Report

Eamon spoke to this paper, providing an update from the PRSC meeting of 10 June 2026, including ongoing workforce pressures (high vacancy levels, turnover and recruitment challenges at AO/EO2 grades), continued high sickness absence, and actions to strengthen workforce planning, governance and data led decision making. PRSC reported strengthened oversight across people, digital, estates and wellbeing, and progress in areas such as Investors in People preparation and development of a revised approach to programme prioritisation.

Eamon noted the supply of staff is now starting to flow, with ongoing recruitment competitions. However, staffing and succession challenges will continue to be an issue in the next 12 months. The PRSC Terms of Reference will be refreshed to include additional areas of interest.

Following discussion on Section 17 litigation and operational constraints the Board agreed to adopt the PRSC Annual Report for 2025–26, noting its positive assurance on governance and strategic resource planning, and approved the DfC People Priorities Plan 2026–2031, providing a five year framework aligned to NICS themes (Leadership & Inclusion, Skills & Capacity, Experience & Environment) to address workforce capability, culture and staff experience and support delivery of Departmental objectives.

Asset Management Plan

Eamon spoke to this paper, updating the Board on the development of DfC's asset management approach. He highlighted that current governance arrangements

(Capital Oversight Group COG and Asset Management Forum AMF) are creating duplication, unclear ownership and slowing progress on the Asset Management Plan due to capacity, data quality and alignment issues.

Strategic Asset Management Unit (SAMU) within Land & Property Services is asking for the new plan by end of March 2027. This will require significant work to gather all the necessary details across DfC estate, including ALBs.

Board members discussed the need to strengthen the Department's approach to asset management, emphasising that a comprehensive baseline of data across all DfC and ALB buildings is a critical first step, with the Government Land and Property Register identified as a key tool to support this. Members highlighted that development of a robust strategic Asset Management Plan is essential, representing a significant lever to enable more effective use of NICS assets, support decisions on reuse or disposal, realise commercial opportunities, and reduce costs. The Board agreed that DfC must clearly define its strategic asset priorities, supported by improved data that reflects the scale and age of its estate, and that a wider strategic, cross departmental conversation is required to maximise coordination and value. The immediate priority was agreed to gather the necessary data and return to ELT to inform a more strategic discussion on asset management and future direction.

The Board approved the Paper.

Risk Management

Trevor introduced the paper, presenting the outcome of the quarterly review of Principal Risks by the Risk Reference Group (RRG). He advised that the Department has transitioned from a five-level to a four-level Risk Appetite Framework.

Six of the eight risks are currently outside tolerance, reflecting increasing pressures across a number of areas, including Cyber Threat, Information Management, Climate Change, People, Commercial and Budget. Trevor also highlighted the development of two new Principal Risks (Transformation and Asset Management), and drew attention to emerging global factors, particularly the situation in the Middle East, which may have cross-cutting impacts across existing risks over the medium term.

Trevor emphasised that a risk-based approach to decision-making continues to be encouraged across the Department, with accountability sitting at appropriate levels to support effective management and mitigation.

In discussion, the Board noted in particular:

- The growing significance of cyber risk as a real and rapidly evolving threat, with a notable increase in attacks across both the public and private sectors; and
- That a programme of work is underway to strengthen the Department's cyber resilience and supporting controls.

DMB noted the position of the Principal Risks and associated actions and agreed the proposed direction of travel on risk management.

Business Plan Update

Trevor introduced the draft 2026–27 Departmental Business Plan (DBP), noting that it sets out the Department's key activities and priorities for the year ahead, aligned to Ministerial priorities and the Programme for Government, and will remain subject to further refinement. He highlighted that the plan has been developed in the absence of an agreed budget, and thanked colleagues across the Department for their significant contributions in progressing the draft in a challenging and uncertain financial context.

Work is ongoing with Deputy Secretaries to review and update Group Business Plans to ensure alignment with the draft DBP and that the plans remain realistic and deliverable. The Board noted that the DBP has been developed on an agile basis, allowing activities and milestones to be adjusted as the budget position and wider operating environment become clearer.

In discussion, members acknowledged the complexity of progressing business planning without a confirmed budget. It was emphasised that maintaining a flexible and responsive approach will be critical to ensuring delivery across the year.

Grainia thanked Trevor and all teams involved for their work in developing the draft plan and highlighted the importance of maintaining a dynamic business planning process, particularly in the context of ongoing financial uncertainty.

DMB approved the draft 2026–27 Departmental Business Plan, noting that it will continue to be refined as the budget position is confirmed and further updates are brought forward in line with the next steps set out in the paper.

Economic and Social Research Programme

George delivered a presentation on the Department's Economic & Social Research Programme and its role in supporting evidence-based decision making.

The presentation outlined how Analytics Division, as a multi-disciplinary team, provides research, analysis and insight to inform policy development, strategy and operational decision-making across the Department. It highlighted the range of analytical support available, including the Economic & Social Research Programme, analytical work programmes, briefings on emerging issues and research reviews.

The Board noted that the Economic & Social Research Programme is a three-year programme (2025–28) which sets the Department's key research priorities and provides high-quality evidence to support delivery against the Strategic Business Planning Framework and Programme for Government. The Programme continues to demonstrate strong demand from policy areas and a consistent track record of delivering useful outputs that inform policy and improve outcomes.

Members were advised on the structured approach to developing and delivering the Programme, including engagement with Groups to identify priorities, collaboration with policy teams, and oversight through established governance arrangements.

Examples of recent research were highlighted, demonstrating impact across areas such as housing, poverty, urban regeneration and social policy.

The presentation also noted work underway to strengthen collaboration across Arm's Length Bodies through a Research Forum, and ongoing efforts to build analytical capability through modernisation, including increased use of automation and data-driven approaches to improve efficiency and maximise the value of data.

The Board noted the presentation and the contribution of the Economic & Social Research Programme in supporting evidence-based policy and decision-making across the Department. Grainia thanked George and his team for their ongoing work.

AOB

Grainia thanked Sharon for her continued contribution to DMB and agreeing to stay on until the end of December 2026.

Grainia also thanked Gemma and Caitlin 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 Section 75 Progress Report, SCS Gifts and Hospitality Paper and the SHDP Outturn Report.