

MINUTES OF THE DE BOARD MEETING
Thursday 2 October 2025
Meeting Room 3, Rathgael House

Attendees:

Ronnie Armour (Chair)
Faustina Graham
Paul Brush
Suzanne Kingon
Paul Corrigan
Anna Carragher
Neil Palmer
Marcella Phillips
Andrew Scott (item 3)
Jennifer Morgan (item 5)
Kim Martin (items 8&9)

Apologies:

Heather Cousins

In attendance:

Bryan Laverty (Board secretary)

Observer:

Carolyn Mayne – Trainee Accountant EO1 – Financial Reporting Team

Permanent Secretary Update

Ronnie reported the following:

- Finance continues to be the main issue and risk for the Department.
- Teachers pay/Workload – unions have submitted an 8% pay claim. Agreement in place that negotiations won't begin until January 2026. The Workload Review report is due by the end of October.
- Review of Baseline Funding – due to report by the end of November.
- TransformED – Significant work ongoing. Two excellent conferences held with around 1000 attendees over the two days.
- Uniform Bill – completed consideration stage; final stage consideration later this month.
- Permanent Secretary appointments process has commenced. Four to be appointed in January 2026.

Grade 3 Updates

Paul advised the following:

- Sen Reform Projects are being stood up.
- The Department is awaiting the judgement in the RAISE geographical areas JR; and

- Early Years – the draft strategy will go to the Executive soon.

Faustina reported as follows:

- The Interchange approach to seconding in support for the Inspectorate is up and running. This will provide up to 5 posts with start dates anticipated to be in December/January; and
- The second set of four specialist ETI post has gone to advertisement.

Suzanne advised the following:

TransformED:

- The Taskforce has been established.
- The Qualifications consultation is underway.
- Schools have been advised of the planning allocations from the Teacher Professional Learning Fund; and
- The enhanced Teacher Induction Programme for the 2025/26 academic year has been launched

The SEN Capital Strategy has gone to the Executive. There is a significant shortfall of funding in future years.

Youthwork Policy Review

Andrew provided:

- Background to the Review.
- The priority areas for consideration.
- An update on the Review to date, including consultation and engagement with the ETI.
- An update on the emerging themes; and
- The next steps.

The Board discussed:

- Future governance arrangements and the role of the EA.
- The involvement of local government in the delivery of services; and
- Capital resourcing of the Youth sector.

Early Years and PfG

Tina Dempster presented her paper which provided the Board with an update on the development of the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy (ELCS).

Tina advised that the minister is committed to bringing a draft ELCS to the Executive in the autumn of 2025.

Tina outlined:

- The context and aims of the ELCS.
- Consultation and engagement undertaken to date.
- Research undertaken by NISRA; and
- The actions already in place.

Tina advised that a bid of £82m has been submitted for 2026/27 to continue the phased approach to the implementation of the Strategy.

The Board discussed issues around capacity/workforce within the sector and inspection arrangements.

(a) Strule Update

(b) Go Live Update

Jennifer spoke to her paper and provided a brief update on the current position of the Programme.

There was discussion on the following:

- The current red risk around challenges in securing schools' consensus and the availability of resource funding to achieve this.
- Linking the work of the education specialists on the Programme with key priority areas for the Minister/Department, e.g. TransformED, and providing assurance to the DE Board around the delivery of the educational element of the Strule Programme.
- Engagement with local community and parents.
- Future funding of sharing activities; and
- Possible underspend of capital funding this year.

Literacy and Numeracy

Suzanne spoke to the paper which provided members with an update on the proposed approach to the development of new literacy and numeracy strategies, including their alignment with the Curriculum Reform Programme.

Suzanne outlined the background to the current position, including NI's performance in an international context and the use of standardised testing.

She advised that revised literacy guidance will be issued in the coming months within the context of the wider curriculum review and under the TransformED banner. She reported that a numeracy strategy is at an earlier stage of development.

The Board had a brief discussion on:

- The use of data from international studies, including buy-in by local schools to the studies; and
- The impact of the Covid-19 period.

Update from ARAC Meeting

Paul provided an update to the Departmental Board on the key areas discussed at the last ARAC meeting on 10 September 2025.

The ARAC received updates on the following:

- Deep Dive Risk #2 – Policy Development
- NIAO.
- Internal Audit Progress Report.
- Fraud and Whistleblowing.
- GTCNI Annual Report and Opinion 2024-25.

- DE Consolidation Accounts 2024/25.
- Risk Management.
- Key issues across NDPBs.

Paul advised there will be a workshop on 28 October with NDPB ARACs.

There was a short discussion around the implications of AI.

DE 2025-26 Business Plan Q2 Progress Report

Kim provided the Board with an update on the mid-year position against actions contained within the 2025/26 DE Business Plan.

The Board noted the four risks currently sitting as orange. Suzanne advised that the Accountability Framework has been deliberately delayed by the Minister – this is a timing issue.

The Board advised that it was content with the ratings and that the mid-year report can be shared with the Minister with updated comments from G3s.

The Board noted the position regarding NDPB Business Plan mid-year reports.

DE Corporate Risk Register (CRR) & Risk Management

Kim spoke to the paper and provided the Board with a quarter 2 update on risk management since the last update to the Board on 7 August.

The Board:

- Approved amendments to the CRR and
- Noted the Department's current risk profile.

External Complaints

Bryan spoke to the External Complaints Report 2024/25, which provided the Board with an update on complaints, trends and lessons learned.

The Board noted the increase in the number of complaints received by the Department and that the increase was centred in the main around one operational area of the Department.

The Board also noted that NIPSO is commencing the development of a standardised approach to the handling of complaints across the public sector. Jeremy will represent DE on the working group.

Finance Update

Neil provided members with an update on the current key financial issues.

Neil provided an update on:

- Ongoing finance exercises with DoF.
- Transformation bids.
- The Department's Five-Year Sustainability Plan.
- Capital Budget.

- Annual reports and Accounts; and
- The high-risk EA IT projects; and
- Prompt payment performance.

HR Report

Marcella provided an update to the Board on the HR report.

She provided an update on resourcing.

Marcella advised that the Department's hierarchy on HRConnect is out of sync due to the number of changes. This needs to be addressed now and consistently thereafter as management information is incomplete as a result.

Pressure is required on business areas to address the position regarding performance management responsibilities.

Marcella advised that the NICSHR Litigation Team would like to have a meeting with corporate governance management in DE. This is to be arranged

The Board had a brief discussion around the application of rules regarding the Permission to Accept outside Business Appointments.

Non Departmental Public Bodies – verbal update

Ronnie advised that:

- The next round of GARs has been arranged for November/December. The Minister will chair the GARs with EA and CCEA.
- Now that DE&EA have settled senior teams a meeting was convened with the Minister two weeks ago to discuss strategic priorities. A further session involving both teams is planned.
- DE/EA Finance teams are holding a meeting next week.
- Internal Audit Report on the Sponsorship of the EA has been received. A limited opinion has been provided. The Report will be considered by ARAC first and then brought to the Board.