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Mr Daniel McCrossan  
Chairperson  
Public Accounts Committee

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7 November 2025

Via email: [committee.publicaccounts@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:committee.publicaccounts@niassembly.gov.uk)

Dear Mr McCrossan

### **NI CIVIL SERVICE BOARD – INDEPENDENT EFFECTIVENESS REVIEW**

The NICS Board is currently evolving and developing and an external review of the effectiveness of the Board and its Committees was commissioned in December 2024 and work on this was completed in May 2025. The review was intended for internal development purposes, aiming to enhance the strategic and operational performance of the Board.

The Terms of Reference (ToR) for the review covered:

- An assessment of how the work of the Board drives the strategic direction of the NICS in supporting and delivering for Ministers and for the Northern Ireland Executive collectively; and
- A review of the terms of reference for each of the current sub committees.

As requested, please find attached a copy of (A) the report presented to NICS Board together with an accompanying (B) action plan to address the proposed recommendations which were agreed at the September 2025 NICS Board meeting.

Also attached is a copy of the revised Terms of Reference for (C) the NICS Board and its three Committees: (D) PfG, (E) ISNI and (F) People for information.

Review of the Board's effectiveness will be carried out on an annual basis with an externally facilitated independent review at least once every 3 years.

Yours sincerely



**JAYNE BYRNE**  
**Secretariat, NICS Board**

# The Executive Office

Independent Review of the Effectiveness of the NICS Board

Report

May 2025



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## 1. Executive Summary

### 1.1. Introduction

The Executive Office (TEO) needs to ensure the effectiveness of the Northern Ireland Civil Service Board (NICS Board) and therefore commits to performing a board effectiveness review with independent input at least every three years. Baker Tilly was appointed in December 2024 to undertake an Independent Review of the Effectiveness of NICS Board.

### 1.2. Scope and objectives

Baker Tilly was contracted to carry out an independent review of the effectiveness of NICS Board.

The review was scoped to answer the following questions:

- i) Review the current terms of reference of the NICS Board;
- ii) Make an assessment of how the work of the Board drives the strategic direction of the NICS in supporting and delivering for Ministers and for the Northern Ireland Executive collectively;
- iii) Review the terms of reference for each of the current sub committees;
- iv) Assess the relationship between the Board and the Permanent Secretary Stocktake;
- v) Provide a view of the composition of the Board, including skill mix, experience and diversity issues;
- vi) Provide a consideration of the role and contribution of the Non-Executive members;
- vii) Assess the Board as a learning organisation, including innovation, change and induction issues;
- viii) Evaluate the Board's clarity of role and culture, including strategic exploration of issues and challenge function; and
- ix) Provide commentary on the governance arrangements and the effectiveness of how the Board operates, including timeliness of decision-making and action.

### 1.3. Approach and Methodology

The review included a number of methods including;

- A desktop review of corporate documentation.
- Board membership undertook the Baker Tilly High Performance Board online survey (86 self-assessment questions benchmarked against best practice).
- One to one consultations with Chair and Board Members.
- Benchmarking review of comparable bodies in other jurisdictions.

#### 1.4. Summary of key findings

Our key findings can be thematically grouped as follows:

- **Function** - exploring the role and remit of the Board.
- **Focus** – testing the levels of understanding of the Board’s activities and how this shapes its focus.
- **Form** - Form refers to the ‘architecture’ or structure of the Board and how the Board does its’ work.
- **Information** - The flow of information through the reporting and support lines to the Board is a critical element of good governance as the quality of information determines the confidence of decision making and is the foundation for assurance and good discussion.
- **Relationships** – referring to the Board dynamic, the flow of conversation, the quality of challenge and the quality of the relationships.

These five dynamics form the key elements of any form of board/oversight body and the inter-relationship between and how these interact is a strong indication of the levels of effectiveness of a governance/oversight body – in this case the NICS Board.

#### 1.5. Function

- The function of the NICS Board has evolved since inception. Originally created as an internal forum to bring together Permanent Secretaries to take a wider view of the service, the current iteration of the NICS Board is set out in a new and agreed Terms of Reference. These terms highlight the Board’s role as the ‘senior decision making and leadership forum for the NI Civil Service’. Furthermore, the Board sets the strategic direction for the NICS; tackles long-term cross-cutting and cultural challenges; provides necessary continuity of service to successive Executives or during other decision-making arrangements; and makes decisions on behalf of the whole NICS.
- Survey and consultation feedback suggests that whilst the agreed Terms of Reference<sup>1</sup> provides an agreed platform through which the Board is convened and exists, the functions of the Board are still evolving and aspirational but taking a long period to be put into practice.
- Whilst the overarching function of the Board is set out, feedback indicates some degree of uncertainty as to appropriateness of the functions (as assigned by agreement of the Board), where it sits within wider governance arrangements and decision making process; its relationship or alignment (or non-alignment) with the Permanent Secretary Stocktake meetings.
- The terms of reference of the NICS Board do not expressly articulate the position/authority of the Chair, nor set out any levers for accountability nor how decision making can be driven.

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<sup>1</sup> NICS Board Terms of Reference November 2023

## 1.6. Focus

- There is a consensus that the work of the NICS Board is on a number of core and current issues and priorities of the wider service, and that in this development stage, the key areas of focus - people, investment and Programme for Government - reflect the broad areas for Board reflection and discussion. However, survey feedback suggests that 38% of members either do not agree or disagree that the board is adequately discussing matters on the agenda or thoroughly discussing the pros and cons of these issues, nor carrying out significant horizon scanning of issues that shape NICS world.
- Feedback is also mixed as regards the nature and focus of conversations with high levels of feedback suggesting that determinations were sometimes hard to quantify, so the focus of the discussion was sometimes seen as advisory or facilitative rather than substantive, influential or outcomes focused. For example, in the self-assessment questionnaire 53% of respondents agreed it was clear what actions arose from Board discussions and a minority of 30% agreed that any actions agreed were implemented as agreed and on time. Whilst this advisory and facilitative role is in line with its remit, there appears a lack of decision making and underpinning sentiments of difficulty in quantifying the work of the Board go to the heart of the matter of the Board's focus/purpose – some 46% of respondents to the survey agreed that there is impact in the work of the Board.
- Consultation and survey feedback suggests a degree of tension in agreement and understanding of the Board's focus. Ostensibly the Board is focused on those matters within its Terms of Reference and specifically on three pillars of people, investment and PfG/Transformation. However, our fieldwork suggests that the Board is
  - Beginning to look at strategic matters – but this is only at the beginning of the process and to date, the Board has not necessarily focused on this very well.
  - There is some focus on the corporate mechanisms and the machinery of civil service - consensus would indicate this is improving e.g the people strategy and the transformation fund.
  - The third tier of focus is on collaboration - but it is our observation and feedback confirms this, that collaborative and collective leadership is an evolving theme.

## 1.7. Form (refers to the 'architecture' or structure of the board and how the board does its' work).

- Ultimately the 'form' of a Board is heavily circumscribed, as it exists through convention and has no statutory or fiduciary powers.
- Non-Executive Members are appointed for a three year term (ending February 2026).
- The wider membership of the Board comprises Permanent Secretary level senior officials.

- The Board meets every two months, and the current model appears to be well bedded into the rhythm of organisational life and functions adequately. It is our observation that identified key areas of focus are well covered in the Committee structure.
  - Broadly, Committees have a defined remit, and this is reflected both in the nature of the agenda, topics discussed and the discussions themselves.
  - The Committee meeting cycle aligns well to Board meetings and there is evidence of an adequate flow of information across the organisation and evidence of effective scrutiny, assurance and re-assurance provided.
- The ISNI committee has 'formed' quite effectively in that the committee has developed an operating model which is progressing the evolution of the draft Investment Strategy and is progressing the 12 Enabling Actions.
  - ISNI reports into wider NICS Board, through the NEM Chair of ISNI Committee, and whilst Board members see and commend progress, there is nonetheless degrees of uncomfortableness at the directness of approach and what is seen sometimes as the Committee almost forcing Permanent Secretaries into 'forced collaboration' such as recent discussions about Enabling Action 9 and the potential introduction of alternative financing models for certain infrastructure assets.
- Feedback suggests that measurement of the effectiveness of the People Committee lies in the outputs achieved by the Committee. A review of minutes of meetings of the past one year indicate that work is either completed or in progress across all pillars of the People Plan and that consultation has concluded with the strategy and implementation plan presented at last NICS Board Meeting (January 2025) with an aligned Board workshop on prioritisation and resourcing of the People Strategy (January 2025).
  - The People Committee is well populated by a cadre of Permanent Secretaries, though it is observed that some of the larger departments with significant staff populations are not on the People Committee, but smaller departments are well represented. It might make sense that larger departments, who can adopt initiatives and make more impact across a wider population, should be included in the Committee.
  - The Committee has taken time to 'find its feet' and whilst the Committee has produced two tangible outputs – the 1 year plan and the 5 year plan – these have been delayed and feedback from consultations suggest that even though the NICS Board is now the Programme Board for implementation of the plan and strategy, more work is possibly needed amongst all members to ensure full buy-in and securing that collective and collaborative leadership to ensure effective implementation.
- We have reviewed and taken feedback on the difference between Permanent Secretary Stocktake Meetings and NICS Board meetings and it appears that

- PSS meetings are held weekly and whilst there is no formal agenda (bar on a once a month basis corporate matters are discussed), key cross service matters are discussed.
- These meetings, whilst again are described as 'informal', appear to carry 'weight' within the wider service and staff 'on the ground' are aware of PSS meetings and any outcomes from them.
- Consequently, we can see that PSS meetings, whilst informal and Permanent Secretary only, are in fact a key forum for senior leaders of the civil service, where a Code of Conduct applies (January 2024), as opposed to the overarching Code of Ethics which applies to all civil servants; and whilst more operational in focus, it does have high levels of awareness in the system. This compares to NICS Board which is 'invisible' to the rest of the organisation, and appears to predominantly 'note' papers, and whilst still evolving has less impact than PSS in their current respective forms. Another matter of note is that whilst in Departmental/Official meetings sending deputies is frequently permitted, in the context of Boards, deputies are not permitted.

#### **1.8. Information** (the flow of information through the Executive team and Board).

- The agenda is largely set by the Chair (or relevant Chair in the case of the Committees). Broadly a review of recent agendum provide an adequate range of both core operational and strategic items for reflection and discussion – some papers deemed 'noting' and not necessarily for decisions or implementing. There is evidence that Board has begun to introduce a more mixed approach to information sharing in that presentations from key staff members on strategic issues take place and this provides Board members with a deep dive of particular areas of interest.
  - A broad observation is that where there is a focus on decision making, this helps focus on papers on key matters, but in the absence of decisions there is a tendency to err into information overload and NICS Board is prone to the latter.
- In general, the quality of information provided is of adequate quality. However, the volume of information and paperwork is high. Whilst much work has gone into creating summative papers and signposting for members into what a paper requires, there is still some work to be done in ensuring all papers adhere to a standard format and that members are clear what they are being asked to 'note', read, discuss or decide – this is not always clear.

#### **1.9. Relationships**

- Survey feedback and one to one consultations indicate that relationships within Board are developing. The relationships and the dynamic can feel forced. There is recognition that relationships have improved, and that the behavioural element of the board's development has been a journey as well. There is a consensus that the board operating environment is now more respectful and collegiate than previous iterations of the board and survey feedback suggests that 75% of members respect each other's positions (including that of the Chair).

- Most consultees agreed that Non Executive Members make a positive contribution to Board discussions. However some feedback suggests a tendency to stray into executive and policy matters, which is not the role of the Non-Executive Members
- The quality of challenge is effective. There are effective levels of debate and discussion, and the level of insight demonstrates high levels of knowledge. Board and Committee members approach challenge professionally and respectfully and there is an over-arching work like approach to how meetings are conducted. There is an overall sense of high levels of professionalism with no evidence of highly negative or combative behaviours. The Non Executive Members are identified as bringing significant external perspective and knowledge to discussions and there is a sense that the challenge function Non Executive Members bring, has been a significant positive development.

#### 1.10. Summary of key recommendations

##### Function

- a. There is a recognition that the function of the NICS Board is evolving and the aspiration of collective and collaborative leadership on cross cutting themes is still aspirational (though reasonable progress has been made in this regard). The Terms of Reference agreed in November 2023 should be re-visited in order to test how well these align to the purpose and function of the Board and how it fits into its broader landscape.
- b. The future function of the NICS Board should explicitly set out therefore a transformative approach to service delivery.
- c. The Board should consider changing its name. At present it is referred to as the Board – when clearly it is not as it does not have the function or authority of a board. Consideration therefore should be given to renaming the group to an alternative such as NICS Management Board or NICS Advisory Board. This change of name may help to provide more definition around the purpose, function and focus (and ultimate impact) of the board.
- d. The overarching sense of lack of authority recurs throughout consultation and feedback and therefore the Board should consider whether the NICS Board would benefit from agreed delegated authority as to what decisions it can make.

##### Focus

- a. Board needs to commit itself to a key number of focus areas – the same ones as present or new ones and to undertake deep dives into these areas to drive them forward.
- b. As per the Irish Civil Service Management Board, it might be useful if the Board undertook an action or renewal plan which sets out a transformation plan over a number of years, with key actions (not unlike the Enabling Actions in ISNI) and focused on the pursuit and achievement of key outputs and outcomes, providing communication and updates on the achievement of these outputs. This would support the Board

in demonstrating action and impact (recognising that going forward NICS Board will be reporting on the PfG outcomes).

### **Form**

- a. The Board should reflect on the effectiveness of the sub-committee structure to ensure the appropriate committees are in use and that their focus aligns to Board objectives and needs. A key area – cross cutting theme across all organisations is digital and ICT. This underpins all aspects of NICS Board discussions and shapes and influences your people strategy, your operational delivery model as well as your underpinning cost base. Consideration should be given to how a Digital Transformation Sub Committee might support the work of a re-focused NICS Board.
- b. In order to gain additional 'reference points', i.e. a wider technical, industry or professional perspective, it is recommended that NICS Board considers the creation of additional fora with whom it can interact to influence, shape and validate its work and outputs.
- c. Consideration should be given to the membership of the Board. At present all Permanent Secretary grades are on the Board. However, in reviewing membership of similar boards, the First Legislative Counsel would not normally be a member of the Board, and the Departmental Solicitor Officer similarly would not be a standing member of the board. In these cases, any legal requirement for the board is served through that senior official attending board on matters arising.
- d. Consideration should also be given to designated replacements. These are allowed at Permanent Secretary StockTake meetings and appear to work effectively. There is a broader argument that Grade 3, who are probably closer to some of the matters under discussion, should be present at the board, however in the case where a Permanent Secretary cannot attend a meeting, they should be allowed to have a designated deputy (fixed) who is almost a shadow board member (as per UK Civil Service Board).

### **Information**

- a. We believe the Board would benefit from a long term scheme of work – planned and agreed in advance with associated meeting plans/agendum and papers. This provides a more disciplined way of working and more focus on the key issues within the Board's remit
- b. The Board should develop a communication strategy or an action plan in order to communicate key messages, vision statements, key outputs etc.. This will support board visibility amongst NICS staff as well as demonstrating transparency.

### **Relationships**

- a. We believe that Board would benefit from its own Code of Conduct. We believe that NICS Board would benefit from a similar code as used at Permanent Secretary StockTake meetings or Team Charter identifying and emphasising how members will work together, acceptable behaviours, a commitment to collective leadership and true collaboration and support.

- b. We believe this board should commit to a Board Development plan and then put in place dedicated time and space for collective development – this will support group cohesion, development as a group and increase relationship building. We further recommend that the Board should set aside one or two occasions annually to socialise together (lunch or dinner) in order to build trust, develop relationships and develop the cohesion skills which are absent at present.
- c. Finally, we believe that the Board would benefit from establishing a periodic self check-in to identify/review inhibiting factors impacting the Board and to use these check ins as an opportunity to keep these factors in mind and to address them with the aim of removing as many inhibiting factors and thus increase the Board's impact and effectiveness.

### 1.11. Conclusion

The findings of this review indicate that significant time and effort has gone into shaping the current model. There is a vision for a corporate body providing collective and inspiring leadership of the service. The broad arrangements are an evolution of previous iterations and there is a sense that progress is being made across the function, form, focus, information and relationship factors.

It is our assessment though that, conscious that this Board can be seen as a work in progress, there are nonetheless, in our opinion, several constraining factors inhibiting the overall effectiveness of the NICS Board. These include;

- The reality is that a single Accounting Officer responsible for a single silo has an undivided vertical reporting line to their Minister and NI Assembly, and that silo's budget can be seen as a potential obstacle to the reforms needed to enable success in the complex architecture of a modern government. Whilst work is in progress inter and intra Ministers, HoCS and Permanent Secretaries to drive more collective leadership, the underpinning principle of the NICS Board – collective, collaborative and cross-cutting thematic leadership – is contingent upon individuals buying into that principle in the first place.
- The HoCS' only tools to drive change at present include line management and persuasion. These are necessary attributes for any transformation leader, along with inspiration and conviction, but they are not sufficient. The leader must also have a clear mandate, with clear authority, to lay down what must happen, to support its implementation and drive accountability.
- The Civil Service is a people institution, and the most important task of its leadership is the recruitment, development, retention and management of its people. The most significant of the Civil Service reforms advocated over the decades are ultimately about people and the way in which they are selected, appointed and managed. The organisational health of the NI Civil Service is overwhelmingly dependent on its people: who they are, and how they are appointed and managed. Therefore, the focus of the NICS Board must be on the service, its people, how it works and how it delivers its services.

- In addressing the fact that Permanent Secretaries are Accounting Officers in their own right and the acknowledging the permanence of the civil service, this “permanence” confers a responsibility on the leadership of the Service to look beyond the time horizon of any government of the day, of any single Minister or government. This is the “stewardship obligation” which underpins most civil services. Stewardship is about fulfilling one’s responsibility in growing the assets entrusted such that they would be handed over to the next generation in better shape. Stewardship is built on internal relationships, both with employees and with customers, suppliers and others. Well stewarded organisations have solid foundations, building on these to develop capabilities that make them resilient to crises.

There is a recognition that the evolution of the NICS Board has accelerated over the past number of months – indeed over the past number of meetings. There is a recognition that the personality and culture of the board has been shaped and influenced, as much by its Board membership as it is by its formal Terms of Reference or any place it has in wider service governance arrangements. There is emerging evidence of more cohesion, there is evidence of a more unified vision and more effective behaviours and board culture.

We are mindful of external calls for NICS Board to demonstrate its impact – we do however recognise that this is a work in progress and there are emerging signs through the work of ISNI Committee for example that this impact will be soon demonstrated, however the effectiveness of the NICS Board is constrained by its unique design, by the overarching system and the voluntary nature of input and the need for collaboration. There is much to commend and build on because there is evidence of a potential dynamic amongst members and evidence of effective working relationships underpinned a desire to effect change.

Lessons from other jurisdictions suggest that leaders of civil service institutions ‘big’ issues are; the need for more expertise; less manic turnover of officials in jobs; more competence in execution and delivery; stronger commercial, IT and project capability; more interchange with the outside world; better management of underperformance. In our view, these are wholly in the gift of senior civil servants in NICS to make happen, if they work collectively, collaboratively, strategically and cross departmentally.

We have referred previously to the concept of stewardship – which we believe should fundamentally underpin public or civil service. Stewardship describes responsible management, over the long view, of assets entrusted for the common good. Stewardship as professional pro-active duty of care is applied in public administration. This requires public officials explicitly to nurture the long-term benefit by exercising foresight, anticipating risks, and spotting opportunities, and acting prudently: in short, good governance.

We believe that if NICS Board adopts a ‘stewardship obligation’ to underpin its future approach, it may help to shape its future state function, re-imagine its focus and yield as yet unseen impact.

## **1.12. Acknowledgements**

We would like to record our special thanks to the Head of the Civil Service, the Members and the Non-Executive Members of the Departmental Board for their support during this review. We would like to

acknowledge the Board Secretariat for their co-operation and thank all consultees for their open and frank approach to our questions and for their generosity in sharing time and ideas with us - thank you.

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## NICS BOARD INDEPENDENT EFFECTIVENESS REVIEW – ACTION PLAN

	Accepted and complete
	Accepted and ongoing
	Partially accepted
	Not accepted

Rec	Recommendation	Accepted Partially Accepted Not Accepted	Action Owner / Timeframe	Actions undertaken
<b>Function</b>				
<b>1a</b>	There is a recognition that the function of the NICS Board is evolving and the aspiration of collective and collaborative leadership on cross cutting themes is still aspirational (though reasonable progress has been made in this regard). The Terms of Reference agreed in November 2023 should be re-visited in order to test how well these align to the purpose and function of the Board and how it fits into its broader landscape.	<b>Accepted</b>	<b>NEM – Chair, ISNI Committee Departmental Solicitor and Head of Government Legal Service NI</b>  <b>Complete</b>	<p>The Terms of Reference for the Board and the Committees incorporate “review provisions” and it is timely to implement a review to reflect the recommendations of the Board Effectiveness Review. Collective and collaborative leadership have been increasing themes within the work of the NICS Board and its Committees.</p> <p>The Terms of Reference for the NICS Board and its Committees have been reviewed, updated and agreed by the Board at its meeting held on 30 September 2025.</p>
<b>1b</b>	The future function of the NICS Board should explicitly set out therefore a transformative approach to service delivery.	<b>Accepted</b>	<b>NEM – Chair, ISNI Committee Departmental Solicitor and Head of Government Legal Service NI</b>  <b>Complete</b>	The NICS Board and its Committees aim to deliver transformative approach to service delivery through for example overseeing the Reform and Transformation elements of PfG, the Enabling Actions within ISNI and the transformation elements of the People Strategy (eg: workforce planning). Transformative service delivery was considered as part of the review of the terms of reference.

**Function** *continued*

<b>1c</b>	The Board should consider changing its name. At present it is referred to as the Board – when clearly it is not as it does not have the function or authority of a board. Consideration therefore should be given to renaming the group to an alternative such as NICS Management Board or NICS Advisory Board. This change of name may help to provide more definition around the purpose, function and focus (and ultimate impact) of the board.	<b>Not Accepted</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<p>The proposed names would suggest to many a dilution of the Board's authority rather than an enhancement which action 1d and other parts of the BER seek to strengthen.</p> <p>The Board agreed not to accept this recommendation.</p>
<b>1d</b>	The overarching sense of lack of authority recurs throughout consultation and feedback and therefore the Board should consider whether the NICS Board would benefit from agreed delegated authority as to what decisions it can make.	<b>Partially Accepted</b>	<b>NICS Board</b>	<p>A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Department of Finance and the Executive Office in respect of their responsibilities for Reform of the Civil Service is in place and currently under review. This enables HOCS to work collectively with the NICS Board and Permanent Secretaries to plan and deliver reform and modernisation of the Service.</p> <p>The Head of the Civil Service (HoCS) leads the NICS and sets the strategic direction, particularly through the leadership of the Permanent Secretaries and the chairing of the NICS Board.</p> <p>The Board does not carry formal statutory or fiduciary responsibilities and operates at all times within the current constitutional and legislative framework. It takes authority also from its responsibilities as set out in its terms of reference.</p> <p>The Board has shared responsibility and a shared position which is currently developing as</p>

				Permanent Secretaries seek to address cross-cutting issues. Further steps to enhance the authority of the Board, such as delegated authority, would require constitutional change and are therefore not being taken forward at this time.
<b>Focus</b>				
<b>2a</b>	Board needs to commit itself to a key number of focus areas – the same ones as present or new ones and to undertake deep dives into these areas to drive them forward.	<b>Accepted</b>	<b>NICS Board</b>	<p>In creating the three Committees the Board has already enhanced the focus of the Board.</p> <p>The Board has also created regular updates from the CSTA, DSO, SIRO Forum and Internal Audit, which will bring out key areas of focus.</p>
<b>2b</b>	As per the Irish Civil Service Management Board, it might be useful if the Board undertook an action or renewal plan which sets out a transformation plan over a number of years, with key actions (not unlike the Enabling Actions in ISNI) and focused on the pursuit and achievement of key outputs and outcomes, providing communication and updates on the achievement of these outputs. This would support the Board in demonstrating action and impact (recognising that going forward NICS Board will be reporting on the PfG outcomes).	<b>Accepted</b>	<b>Committee Chairs</b>	The Board will ensure action plans are in place for cross cutting major transformation, such as the People Strategy. Action plans will define a clear trajectory of change with agreed outcomes, milestones, and performance measures that collectively demonstrate progress towards the long-term vision. This approach will enable the Board, through its committees, to monitor delivery maturity, manage risk, and assess impact consistently across cross-cutting programmes.
<b>Form</b>				
<b>3a</b>	The Board should reflect on the effectiveness of the sub-committee structure to ensure the appropriate committees are in use and that their focus aligns to Board objectives and needs. A key area – cross cutting theme across all organisations is digital and ICT. This underpins	<b>Accepted</b>	<b>NICS Board</b>	The Board has reviewed the existing sub-committee framework and agreed it remains appropriate. The structure continues to align effectively with the Board's strategic objectives and operational needs.

	<p>all aspects of NICS Board discussions and shapes and influences your people strategy, your operational delivery model as well as your underpinning cost base. Consideration should be given to how a Digital Transformation Sub Committee might support the work of a re-focused NICS Board.</p>			<p>Progress on Digital Transformation is being achieved through a multi-faceted approach, which includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delivery of <b>Transformation Projects</b> aligned with strategic priorities.</li> <li>• Integration within the <b>People Strategy</b>, specifically under the key initiative: <i>Digital Upskilling of the Workforce</i> and the key enabler: <i>Supportive and Empowering Digital Environment</i>.</li> <li>• Implementation of the <b>Digital Maturity Assessment</b> to benchmark and guide digital capability development.</li> <li>• Strategic oversight and input from the <b>Chief Scientific and Technology Adviser</b>, ensuring alignment with broader innovation and technology goals.</li> </ul> <p>The Perm Sec of DfE is working on proposals to bring these strands of work together and provide recommendations on the best way forward. This may include the establishment of a further Board Committee.</p>
<p><b>3b</b></p>	<p>In order to gain additional ‘reference points’, ie: a wider technical, industry or professional perspective, it is recommended that NICS Board considers the creation of additional fora with whom it can interact to influence, shape and validate its work and outputs.</p>	<p><b>Accepted</b></p>	<p><b>NICS Board - Ongoing</b></p>	<p>The three Non-Executive Members (NEMs) bring external expert advice to Board.</p> <p>Also a number of expert panels have been convened to support the work of the Board and its Committees. Widespread consultations have taken place on PfG, ISNI and People Strategy. In particular, the SRO Network and the FHRAG</p>

				group have been used as expert sounding boards for the relevant Committees.  The Terms of Reference reset make specific provision for the use of such groups.
<b>3c</b>	Consideration should be given to the membership of the Board. At present all Permanent Secretary grades are on the Board. However, in reviewing membership of similar boards, the First Legislative Counsel would not normally be a member of the Board, and the Departmental Solicitor Officer similarly would not be a standing member of the board. In these cases, any legal requirement for the board is served through that senior official attending board on matters arising.	<b>Partially Accepted</b>	<b>NICS Board</b>	Departmental Solicitor and Head of Government Legal Service NI to remain a member of the Board.  First Legislative Counsel (FLC) to cease membership from 1 October 2025.
<b>3d</b>	Consideration should also be given to designated replacements. These are allowed at Permanent Secretary Stocktake meetings and appear to work effectively. There is a broader argument that Grade 3, who are probably closer to some of the matters under discussion, should be present at the board, however in the case where a Permanent Secretary cannot attend a meeting, they should be allowed to have a designated deputy (fixed) who is almost a shadow board member (as per UK Civil Service Board).	<b>Partially Accepted</b>	<b>September 2025</b>	It has been agreed that in exceptional circumstances and with agreement of the NICS Board Chair deputies may be permitted to attend Board meetings as observers on behalf of executive members. This will be reviewed annually.
<b>Information</b>				
<b>4a</b>	We believe the Board would benefit from a long-term scheme of work – planned and agreed in advance with associated meeting plans/agendum and papers. This provides a more disciplined way of working and more focus on the key issues within the Board's remit.	<b>Accepted</b>	<b>HOCS as Chair</b>	A forward look Board agenda is circulated with the NICS Board papers and feedback is given to the Chair and her Chief of Staff. This will be reviewed by the Board on a six-monthly basis.

<b>4b</b>	The Board should develop a communication strategy or an action plan in order to communicate key messages, vision statements, key outputs etc. This will support board visibility amongst NICS staff as well as demonstrating transparency.	<b>Accepted</b>	<b>TEO Deputy Director, Executive Services &amp; International Relations</b>  January 2026	The need for a comms plan was agreed and is currently under consideration.
<b>Relationships</b>				
<b>5a</b>	We believe that Board would benefit from its own Code of Conduct. We believe that NICS Board would benefit from a similar code as used at Permanent Secretary StockTake meetings or Team Charter identifying and emphasising how members will work together, acceptable behaviours, a commitment to collective leadership and true collaboration and support.	<b>Not Accepted</b>	<b>N/A</b>	We believe the Board and the Perm Sec Cohort are already bound by the NICS Code of Ethics, AO / Departmental responsibilities and therefore an additional Code of Conduct was not deemed necessary.
<b>5b</b>	We believe this Board should commit to a Board Development plan and then put in place dedicated time and space for collective development – this will support group cohesion, development as a group and increase relationship building. We further recommend that the Board should set aside one or two occasions annually to socialise together (lunch or dinner) in order to build trust, develop relationships and develop the cohesion skills which are absent at present.	<b>Accept</b>	<b>HoCS Perm Sec DoH NEM Chair, People Committee</b>	<b>Recommendations 5b &amp; 5c are linked</b>  A Board Development Plan proposal has been considered, and work is ongoing in this regard.
<b>5c</b>	Finally, we believe that the Board would benefit from establishing a periodic self check-in to identify/review inhibiting factors impacting the Board and to use these check ins as an opportunity to keep these factors in mind and to address them with the aim of removing as many inhibiting factors and thus increase the Board's impact and effectiveness.	<b>Accept</b>	<b>HoCS Perm Sec DoH NEM Chair, People Committee</b>	<b>Recommendations 5b &amp; 5c are linked</b>  A Board Development Plan proposal has been considered, and work is ongoing in this regard.



## **NI Civil Service Board – Terms of Reference**

### **Purpose**

1. The Board is the senior decision making and leadership forum for the NI Civil Service. It sets the strategic direction for the NICS; tackles long-term cross-cutting and cultural challenges; provides necessary continuity of service to successive Executives or during other decision-making arrangements; and makes decisions on behalf of the whole NICS.
2. Its mission is to lead the NICS so as to serve the Executive of the day, and to be fit to serve the Executive of the future.
3. In doing so, the Board addresses the key strategic/cross cutting issues facing the NICS, as described below under section 4: Role.

### **Values**

4. Members commit to living the NICS Code of Ethics core values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality as a Board and to promoting them more widely.

### **Governance and Authority**

5. By its nature, the Board does not carry formal statutory or fiduciary responsibilities operating at all times within the current constitutional and legislative framework. It takes its authority from its responsibilities as set out in these terms of reference.
6. While executive members operate under the direction and control of their respective Minister (and those who have been designated as Principal Accounting Officers carry specific personal responsibilities), all members commit to working collectively and collaboratively to discharge effectively the responsibilities of the NICS Board in a manner that meets the needs of, and is consistent with, the values of the NICS. This includes working together to resolve system-wide issues and to ensure that the Executive receives collective advice on relevant cross-cutting issues.
7. The Executive retains overall decision-making authority for the Programme for Government (PfG) and the Investment Strategy for NI (ISNI). The Finance Minister retains overall decision-making authority for the People Strategy.

## **Role**

In pursuit of its purpose, the Board's role is to:

8. Provide collective leadership to the NICS as a whole.
9. Be a forum for discussion and agreement on relevant NICS-wide leadership, delivery and governance issues and challenges.
10. Give collective advice and counsel in support of the Executive as a whole, through the Head of the Civil Service (HoCS) on relevant cross-cutting issues, including as requested by the Executive.
11. Horizon-scan and guide the assessment and management of cross-cutting risks affecting the Executive and the NICS.
12. To recommend the initiation or commissioning of work to address root causes and behaviours limiting performance within the scope of the Board's remit.
13. Provide oversight and challenge to support the delivery of the Board's own work programme and the NICS People Plan.
14. Provide oversight and challenge in support of the Executive in developing and delivering its s20 programme (the Programme for Government, PfG) and its Investment Strategy.
15. Report through the Head of the Civil Service (HoCS) to the Executive on its work at least yearly.

## **Membership**

16. The NICS Board will be chaired by the Head of the Civil Service.
17. Membership of the NICS Board will include the permanent secretaries of all Northern Ireland departments, the Departmental Solicitor, and three non-executive members. Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) leads of programme boards and others will be invited to attend meetings as appropriate to advise the Board on strategic matters and assist it in dealing with Board matters that fall within their areas of responsibility.
18. In exceptional circumstances and with agreement of the Chair, deputies may be permitted to attend as observers on behalf of executive members. This will be reviewed annually.

## Meetings

19. The Board meets six times a year. Additional Board meetings will be convened if required.
20. Where the Chair agrees, papers may be circulated by correspondence for information. Where a decision is required by the Board in advance of the next scheduled Board meeting the Chair may engage with members to seek their agreement to proceed via a written procedure.

## Secretariat and support

21. Secretariat support will be provided by The Executive Office.
22. Proposals for papers should be submitted to the Secretariat no less than 4 weeks before the meeting.
23. Papers and agenda will be circulated 5 days in advance of a meeting.
24. Minutes will be agreed by correspondence within 14 days of a meeting.

## Information Requirements

25. The Board will agree its information requirements from time to time. At a minimum it will be provided annually with:
  - Progress reports and dashboard for the Programme for Government, Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland and the NICS People Strategy;
  - HR MI Report;
  - Internal Audit Annual Report;
  - NI Civil Contingencies Risk Register
  - Regular reports from the Chief Science and Technology Advisers, the SIRO Forum and the Departmental Solicitor
  - Cross-cutting NIAO issues and progress reports.

## Committees

26. The Board may establish committees of the Board to take forward work on defined topics that are within the Board's terms of reference.

## Evaluation

27. The Chair will ensure that a Board effectiveness review is performed annually, with independent input at least every three years, and that results are acted upon.

28. This is distinct from the individual performance of Board members which will operate in line with standard SCS and NEM performance management processes.

### **Accountability**

29. The Board will prepare and publish an annual report on its progress in delivering that programme. To ensure transparency, it will also routinely publish Board minutes of its meetings.

September 2025



## **NI Civil Service ISNI Committee - Terms of Reference**

### **Purpose**

1. The ISNI Committee is a Committee of the NICS Board. Its purpose is to create a coherent single point of focus and accountability on ISNI delivery.
2. The Committee will monitor the implementation of both the ISNI (when approved by the Executive) and the associated Enabling Action Plan, which will address findings from reports on the delivery of major capital projects (including NIAO, OECD, SIB and PAC reports). It may also recommend appropriate actions if Enabling Actions or projects are not meeting the relevant KPIs.

### **Governance and Authority**

3. The Committee operates under delegated authority from the NICS Board. Its terms of reference are agreed by the Board and provide for the Committee to create a coherent single point of focus on ISNI delivery.
4. The Committee operates as the Programme Board for ISNI on behalf of the NICS Board. In this capacity, it reports to the NICS Board on key findings and recommended actions of a strategic and material nature relating to ISNI delivery.
5. The Executive retains overall decision-making authority for ISNI.

### **Responsibilities**

The Committee's responsibilities include:

6. To provide regular reporting to the NICS Board in line with governance proposals within ISNI. This will include the provision of quarterly and annual ISNI progress reports to the NICS Board including escalation of issues to the NICS Board and / or Chair as appropriate.
7. To agree a set of indicators and metrics against which improvements in performance in delivery of major capital projects can be measured and to assess options to make infrastructure investment and delivery more effective.

8. To scrutinise and challenge management information on performance in the delivery of major capital projects to the NICS Board, recommending actions to assist with Project Delivery.
9. To oversee the delivery of the Enabling Action Plan on behalf of NICS Board, recommending mitigation of risks and issues and ensuring objectives and milestones are achieved. This will include prioritisation of interventions identified in the ISNI Enabling Action Plan and ensuring that plans, delivery structures and resources are in place to take forward priority interventions.
10. To recommend the initiation or commissioning of work to address root causes and behaviours limiting performance in the delivery of major capital projects and to identify, assess and test new approaches to delivery which have the potential to significantly improve performance in the delivery of major capital projects.
11. To provide collective advice on infrastructure delivery, including alignment with relevant strategic policy and statutory obligations including the Climate Change (NI) Act 2022, on behalf of NICS Board.
12. To support the Executive in reviewing the effectiveness of the ISNI as and when necessary and to advise on the most appropriate method and implementation of an Infrastructure Needs Assessment to assist with the design of future ISNI Programmes for the benefit of NI.

## Membership

13. The Committee will be chaired by an NICS Board non-executive Board member. Its membership will include the Strategic Investment Board's Head of Investment Strategy, who will act as the ISNI "Programme Sponsor", co-ordinating the oversight of the ISNI and Enabling Action delivery. The Committee will also have as members the DoF Head of Procurement alongside departmental representation.
14. Changes in the nature of the composition of the Committee will be approved by the NICS Board. Changes to individual membership within the agreed composition can be made by agreement between the Chair and the NICS Board Chair.
15. The Committee can seek specialist advice from relevant experts subject to the necessary approvals as it undertakes its function. To assist with this, the Committee will have access to local, national, and international expertise, including specific subject matter experts and representatives from industry, academia, arm's length bodies and the voluntary and community sectors.
16. In particular the ISNI Committee will work closely with the SRO Network drawn from SRO's working across the NI Public Sector.
17. The updated membership is provided at **Annex A**.

## **Meetings**

18. The Committee will meet as often as is required to undertake its role and responsibilities, but no less than once per quarter.
19. A quorum shall consist of the Chair and at least 3 other members. A note of each meeting will be recorded and retained and circulated to the members.
20. The Committee may convene additional meetings to ensure timely decision-making and responsiveness to emerging delivery challenges.

## **Secretariat and support**

21. Secretariat support will be provided by The Executive Office.
22. Proposals for papers should be submitted to the Secretariat no less than 2 weeks before the meeting.
23. Papers and agenda will be circulated 5 days in advance of a meeting.

## **Review**

24. The Committee will conduct an annual review of its terms of reference and bring to the NICS Board for approval any proposals for change its role or responsibilities.

**Updated membership of the ISNI Committee**

<b>Chair</b>	Patrick Magee NICS Board
<b>Permanent Secretary Representation</b>	Denis McMahon (DfI) Ian Snowden (DfE) David Malcolm (TEO)
<b>Officials</b>	Sharon Smyth (DoF) Paul Price (DfC) Colin Woods (DfI) Judith Andrews (DfI) Heather Cousins (DE) Chris Matthews (DoH) Rachel Sankannawar (DfE) Tracey Teague (DAERA) Scott Wilson (ISNI, SIB) Kevin Hegarty (SIB)
<b>Secretariat</b>	TEO (Interim)

The Committee Chair (having consulted with the NICS Board Chair) will have the authority to invite other Permanent Secretaries and Departmental or ALB Officials to become members / attendees at the Committee.



## **NI Civil Service People Committee – Terms of Reference**

### **Purpose**

1. The People Committee is a committee of the NICS Board. Its purpose is to support the Board in delivering its responsibilities in relation to building the capacity and the capability of the NICS, including the development and delivery of the NICS People Strategy 2025–2030.

### **Governance and Authority**

2. The Finance Minister retains formal decision-making authority for the People Strategy and its constituent elements.
3. The NICS Board is responsible for setting the strategic direction, ambition, and organisational priorities for the NICS People Strategy 2025–2030. The Board approves the Terms of Reference for the People Committee and retains overall governance oversight.
4. The Committee operates under delegated authority from the NICS Board. It makes strategic delivery decisions, such as setting priorities, endorsing cross-cutting initiatives, and addressing systemic delivery risks, on behalf of the Board.
5. The Committee is also responsible for assessing substantive changes to the People Strategy's strategic direction and delivery plans and endorsing them for consideration and approval by the NICS Board.
6. The Committee operates as the Sponsoring Group for the programme established to oversee the delivery of the People Strategy. In this capacity, it supports the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) by providing strategic direction, championing the

programme at senior level, and helping to resolve risks and issues. It is not accountable for delivery but plays a key role in enabling success<sup>1</sup>.

## Responsibilities

The Committee's responsibilities include:

7. Providing strategic guidance on the NICS's agreed people priorities of workforce skills and capacity; experience and environment, and leadership and inclusion.
8. Reviewing proposals for implementing key cross-cutting initiatives such as recruitment process simplification, strategic workforce planning, review of professions, improvement of digital skills, HR policy renewal, workforce health and well-being, approaches to pay and reward, supporting managers, and building capability, emphasising collective leadership.
9. Providing robust assurance to the NICS Board that the People Strategy's governance, delivery, and accountability structures are effective. This includes routinely reviewing programme plans and delivery arrangements to ensure alignment with organisational capacity, resource availability, and agreed strategic priorities.
10. Monitoring progress in delivering the NICS People Strategy against agreed milestones, success criteria, and expected benefits.
11. Providing continued sponsorship, commitment and endorsement in support of the objectives of the People Strategy, as specified in the programme documentation.
12. Supporting the Accounting Officer and SRO in identifying, escalating, and helping to resolve strategic risks and issues affecting the successful delivery of the People Strategy, including interdependencies with other major programmes. If a resolution is not achieved the Committee will escalate the issue to the NICS Board and outline its preferred solution.
13. Promoting best practice in governance, project management transparency, and accountability in people-related matters.
14. Considering any other matters remitted to it by the NICS Board.

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<sup>1</sup> As per guidance set out in HMT's Teal Book

## Membership

15. The Committee will be chaired by a NICS Board non-executive Board member. Its membership will be the Chair of the NICS Board, the DoF Permanent Secretary, three other executive Board members, and the Deputy Secretary, People & OD, SRO for the People Strategy. It is intended that the combined membership should represent a minimum of 50% of the NICS workforce.
16. Changes in the nature of the composition of the Committee will be approved by the NICS Board. Changes to individual membership within the agreed composition can be made by agreement between the Chair and the NICS Board Chair.
17. The Committee will be supported by other senior officials as required, including the Deputy Secretary NICSHR; Deputy Secretary, Digital, Security and Finance Shared Service, Integr8 SRO, and the Communications Lead and Delivery Director for the People Strategy.
18. Updated membership is provided at **Annex A**.

## Meetings

19. The Committee will convene bi-monthly, with supplementary meetings scheduled as necessary to ensure timely decision-making and responsiveness to emerging delivery challenges.
20. A quorum shall consist of the Chair and at least three other members.
21. A note of each meeting will be recorded and retained and circulated to the Committee.

## NICS Board updates

22. The Committee Chair will provide a formal update to the NICS Board following each Committee meeting. This will include a summary of key issues discussed, recommendations endorsed, risks escalated, and delivery progress against the People Strategy.
23. A standing item on the NICS Board agenda will enable timely discussion of People Committee business.

## **Secretariat and support**

24. Secretariat support will be provided by The Executive Office.
25. Proposals for papers should be submitted to the Secretariat no less than 2 weeks before the meeting.
26. Papers and agenda will be circulated [5 days] in advance of a meeting.

## **Review**

27. The Committee will conduct an annual review of its terms of reference and bring to the NICS Board for approval any proposals to change its role or responsibilities.

**Updated membership of the People Committee**

<b>Chair</b>	Laura McKeaveney NICS Board
<b>NICS Board Chair</b>	Jayne Brady (HOCS)
<b>Permanent Secretary Representation</b>	Neil Gibson (DoF) and AO  Katrina Godfrey (DAERA)  David Malcolm (TEO)  Hugh Widdis (DoJ)  Colum Boyle (DfC)
<b>Officials</b>	Jill Minne (People Strategy SRO)
<b>Secretariat</b>	TEO (Interim)

The Committee will be supported by other senior officials, including the Deputy Secretary NICSHR; Deputy Secretary, Digital, Security and Finance Shared Service, Integr8 SRO, and the Communications Lead and Delivery Director for the People Strategy.

The Committee Chair (having consulted with the NICS Board Chair) will have the authority to invite other Permanent Secretaries and Departmental Officials to become members/attendees at the Committee.