

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL AFFAIRS (DAERA)

BOARD OPERATING FRAMEWORK

**Version 1.0
May 2026**



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**
www.daera-ni.gov.uk

An Roinn
**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Depairtment o'
**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

CONTENTS

SECTION 1 –INTRODUCTION.....	2
SECTION 2 – PURPOSE.....	2
SECTION 3 – MEMBERSHIP	5
SECTION 4 – ROLES	7
SECTION 5 – BOARD COMMITTEES.....	11
SECTION 6 – DECISIONS AND REPORTING	14
SECTION 7 – SUPPORT AND BOARD EFFECTIVENESS.....	17
SECTION 8 – RELATIONS WITH ARM'S LENGTH BODIES	19

SECTION 1 - INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This DAERA Board Operating Framework sets out and clarifies the functions, aims, responsibilities and membership of the DAERA Departmental Board. It has been developed from guidance set out in the DoF publication, *Corporate governance in central government departments: Code of good practice NI 2025*.
- 1.2 The Board Operating Framework will be reviewed and updated at least every two years. The board secretariat will ensure all new board members are provided with a copy of this document as part of their induction process.

SECTION 2 - PURPOSE

Purpose of DAERA

- 2.1 DAERA has responsibility for policy development and delivery across a wide range of areas including the environment, food, farming, fisheries, forestry, animal health and animal welfare. It also plays a key role in championing the wellbeing of rural communities and is the lead government department in Northern Ireland for climate change.
- 2.2 The Department has two executive agencies: the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and Forest Service, each with its own agency management boards.
- 2.3 The DAERA vision is *Towards 2050: Delivering a net zero nature-positive future, supporting sustainable agriculture and thriving rural communities*. The Department's strategic priorities are set out in the DAERA Corporate Plan 2025-2027, which is underpinned by the production of annual business plans.
- 2.4 The Department delivers most of its functions under the direction of the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, with some functions resting with

and delivered under the direction and control of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

- 2.5 The permanent secretary is the principal Accounting Officer (PAO) for the Department having been designated as such by the Department of Finance.

Purpose of the Departmental Board

- 2.6 The purpose of the Departmental Board is to support senior officials in directing the long-term business of the department as effectively as possible and to support the PAO in discharging their responsibilities under Managing Public Money Northern Ireland (MPMNI). It brings together senior DAERA officials (executive board members) along with non-executive board members (NEBMs) from outside government.
- 2.7 The board operates as a collegiate forum under the leadership of the Chair, ensuring that the appropriate strategic planning processes are in place to secure the delivery of ministerial policy decisions and effective operational management of their implementation. The board meets in person and individual board members are required to comply with the need for confidentiality in relation to specific board discussions.
- 2.8 The board does not decide policy or exercise the powers of ministers. The department's policy is decided by Ministers on advice from Officials and in line with budget and resource availability.
- 2.9 The board's role is to provide collective scrutiny and advice on five main areas:
- **Strategic Clarity** – setting the vision and/or mission and ensuring all activities, either directly or indirectly, contribute towards it; long-term capability and horizon scanning, ensuring strategic decisions are based on a collective understanding of policy issues; and using outside perspective to ensure that the department is challenged on its outcomes.

- **Commercial Sense** – approving the distribution of responsibilities; advising on sign-off of large operational projects or programmes; ensuring sound financial management; scrutinising the allocation of financial and human resources to achieve the corporate and annual business plan targets; ensuring organisational design supports attaining strategic objectives; setting the department's risk appetite and ensuring controls are in place to manage risk; evaluation of the board and its members, and succession planning.
- **Talented People** – ensuring the department has the capability to deliver and to plan to meet current and future needs.
- **Results Focus** – shaping the departmental business plan, including strategic aims and objectives; monitoring and steering performance against the corporate and annual business plan; scrutinising performance of arm's length bodies (ALBs); and setting the department's standards and values.
- **Management Information** – ensuring clear, consistent, comparable performance information is used to drive improvements.

2.10 Some of these matters are delegated to committees of the board to consider and report back on to the board.

2.11 The Departmental Board will meet at least five times per annum and an attendance record of individual board members will be disclosed in the DAERA annual report and accounts in compliance with the requirements set out in the Financial Reporting Manual (FReM). This will cover meetings of the board, and its committees held in the period to which the Resource Accounts relate.

2.12 A forward work programme will be developed on a rolling basis for the board to allow it to effectively discharge its duties. This programme will be adapted as required by the permanent secretary as chair of the board.

SECTION 3- MEMBERSHIP

3.1 The board comprises executive members and NEBMs.

Executive members

3.2 The chair of the Departmental Board is the permanent secretary / PAO.

3.3 The following are also executive members of the board:

- Deputy Secretaries in the core department,
- the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA);
and
- the Finance Director.

Non-executive board members

3.4 In addition, board membership will include at least two NEBMs.

Quorum

3.5 For Departmental Board meetings, a minimum of six members must be present for the board to be deemed quorate, at least one of whom should be a NEBM.

3.6 Members should attend and participate fully in board meetings and committee meetings regularly and should also take part in other board-related events when required. Decisions should be taken both corporately and objectively, acting in the public interest and in keeping with the NICS Code of Ethics and Seven Principles of Public Life (the Nolan Principles).

3.7 In the absence of the permanent secretary, a board member nominated by the permanent secretary will act as their deputy to chair the board.

Other Attendees

3.8 The NICSHR Business Partner, board secretary and the Director of Corporate Governance also attend meetings but are not members of the board.

3.9 Other staff or individuals may attend the board by invitation to observe, or to present papers.

3.10 Officials attending to present a paper will normally do so in person, or via Teams with the prior approval of the chair.

SECTION 4 – ROLES

Role of the chair

4.1 As chair of the board, the permanent secretary's role is to:

- set the agenda for and chair board meetings;
- oversee the board secretariat function in providing members with accurate, timely and good quality management information to allow them to consider properly all matters brought before them;
- ensure adherence to and comply or explain the principles set out in the *Corporate governance in central government departments: Code of good practice NI 2025*; and
- ensure that a board effectiveness review is performed annually with independent input at least every three years, with results acted upon.

Role of executive board members

4.2 The executive board members discharge the following roles:

- act solely in the interests of the department as a whole and not champion their own/business area interests;
- notify the board of any matters that threaten the regularity, propriety or value-for-money within which the department carries out its business; and
- notify the board of any significant issues which may impact on the department's leadership, medium-term capability and significant risks to delivery of policy, along with mitigating actions taken.

4.3 The role of the Finance Director is outlined in more detail in MPMNI Annex 4. In the context of the board, the Finance Director is the main source of advice on the department's financial position and should actively challenge expenditure decisions/proposals, especially in relation to affordability and value for money.

Role of non-executive board members

- 4.4 The primary role of NEBMs is to contribute to the good governance of the department. NEBMs should be prepared to offer constructive challenge with a view to ensuring that all aspects of strategy and delivery are scrutinised for effectiveness and efficiency.
- 4.5 NEBMs are appointed on merit, reflecting ability and experience for an initial period of 3 years. This may be extended by further defined periods by agreement. The maximum total term of appointment is six years.
- 4.6 Responsibilities of the NEBMs include:
- participating fully in the formulation of business planning, strategy development and audit and risk management;
 - participating fully in the process of monitoring the department's progress towards meeting agreed objectives and targets;
 - chairing where appropriate committees of the board, and reporting back on the business conducted by the committee to the board through agreed mechanisms;
 - reporting their views in their own section of the department's annual report and accounts; and
 - contributing to work outside of the board, such as leading independent reviews when requested to do so.

The role of all members

- 4.7 All members are expected to contribute constructively to the business of the board and to follow the NICS Code of Ethics and the Seven Principles of Public Life.
- 4.8 Where members have concerns about the running of the department or a proposed action which cannot be resolved, they should ensure that these are recorded in the minutes.
- 4.9 On appointment members are required to notify and register with the board secretariat any matters/issues where they might have a conflict of interest

(actual, potential or perceived). This information will be placed on the DAERA internet site and updated at least annually.

- 4.10 The chair will ask members to declare any issues on which they might have a conflict of interest at the beginning of each meeting. The board should consider how matters on which a member may have a conflict of interest will be handled.

Appointment of board members

- 4.11 The permanent secretary is responsible for the appointment of DAERA board members.
- 4.12 Appraisal of members' performance will be carried out through the performance management system, or in the case of NEBMs through an annual performance appraisal conducted by the permanent secretary.

Board secretary role

- 4.13 Under the direction of the permanent secretary, the board secretary's responsibilities include:
- developing and agreeing the agenda for board meetings with the Chair and, ensuring all relevant items are brought to the board's attention;
 - ensuring good information flows within the board and between it and its committees and between executive and NEBMs, including:
 - challenging and ensuring the quality of board papers and board information
 - ensuring board papers are received by board members according to a timetable agreed by the board
 - providing advice and support on governance matters and helping to implement improvements in the governance structure and arrangements;
 - ensuring the board follows due process;
 - providing assurance to the board that the department:

- complies with government policy, as set out in the Corporate governance in central government departments: Code of good practice NI 2025.
- adheres to the code's principles and supporting provisions on a comply or explain basis (which should form part of the report accompanying the annual accounts);
- acting as the focal point for interaction between NEBMs and the department, including arranging detailed briefing for NEBMs and meetings between NEBMs and officials, as requested or appropriate;
- recording board decisions accurately and ensuring action points are followed up; and
- arranging induction and professional development of board members.

SECTION 5 - BOARD COMMITTEES

Departmental Audit and Risk Assurance Committee

- 5.1 The board is supported in its role by the Departmental Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC), which is a committee of the board with no executive powers. It is chaired by a suitably experienced NEBM. Its membership includes NEBMs and independent external members from outside the department. The Audit and Risk Assurance Committee is not charged with making or endorsing any decisions and it takes care to maintain its independence.
- 5.2 ARAC's role includes reviewing the comprehensiveness of assurances in meeting the board's and PAO's assurance needs and reviewing the reliability and integrity of these assurances. Its terms of reference, including its role and the authority delegated to it by the board, are set out here. – [ARAC Terms of Reference](#)

Finance and Major Projects Committee

- 5.3 The role of the Finance and Major Projects Committee is to assist the board to meet the corporate governance responsibilities for the department. It carries specific responsibility for:
- ensuring that the department has in place sound financial management and effective arrangements for scrutinising the allocation of financial resources to achieve strategic objectives;
 - ensuring that clear, consistent, comparable performance information is used to drive improvement, and monitoring and steering performance against plans; and
 - maintaining a strategic overview of how the department's major programmes and projects are being managed and delivered.
- 5.4 The committee is normally chaired by a NEBM. Membership of the committee includes executive board members and the Finance Director.

- 5.5 The committee brings a particular focus to financial management and the management of projects/programmes to deliver current and future needs. The committee augments the existing governance arrangements already in place to manage the department's major programmes and projects through additional oversight and scrutiny.
- 5.6 Its terms of reference, including its role and the authority delegated to it by the board, are set out here [Finance and Major Projects Committee \(FMPC\) Terms of Reference \(ToR\)](#)

Capacity and Capability Committee

- 5.7 The Capacity and Capability Committee supports the work of the board by ensuring that the Department has the necessary staff and skills to achieve its strategic objectives. The committee provides valuable insights and recommendations to the board on matters related to workforce planning, training and development, and resource allocation.
- 5.8 The committee also monitors the progress of workforce planning initiatives, evaluating their effectiveness, and seeking additional assurances as needed. The committee is normally chaired by a NEBM and membership includes executive board members, the Director of Strategic Support Directorate, the NICS HR Strategic Business partner and Head of Capacity, Capability, Equality and Diversity Team.
- 5.9 Its terms of reference, including its role and the authority delegated to it by the Departmental Board, are set out here **Terms Of Reference (ToR) Capacity and Capability Committee**

Ad-Hoc Committees of the Board

- 5.10 The board has discretion to establish additional ad hoc committees chaired by board members, to address particular issues as they arise. Such committees

will report back to the board on completion of their work and, following this, will be stood down at the discretion of the board.

Reporting to the Board

- 5.11 Each committee will provide a written update and/or a copy of its latest agreed minutes to the board and Accounting Officer after each of its meetings. A template for the written update can be found at Annex A. Where minutes have not been agreed a verbal update will be provided by the Chair of the committee.
- 5.12 ARAC will also provide the board and PAO with an Annual Report summarising the committee's activities during the year.

SECTION 6 - DECISIONS AND REPORTING

Matters always dealt with by the Board

6.1 The board should always consider and provide advice to the Principal Accounting Officer on the following:

- shaping the corporate plan and annual departmental business plan, including strategic aims and objectives; including monitoring and steering performance against outcomes and performance measures;
- ensuring sound financial planning and management; including scrutinising the allocation of financial resources to achieve relevant plans; and advising on sign-off of large operational projects or programmes;
- setting the department's risk appetite and ensuring controls are in place to manage risk;
- overseeing climate related issues and associated risks, and monitoring progress against climate related goals and targets;
- People – ensuring the department has the capacity and capability to deliver and to plan to meet current and future needs;
- monitoring of other departmental resources to ensure the long-term capability of the department;
- considering the department's IT, information security, H&S, estate asset management, sustainability, civil contingencies, raising a concern and complaints arrangements; and
- scrutinising performance of the department's executive agencies and ALBs.

6.2 The board also has an important role in reviewing, as appropriate and prior to publication, various departmental documents.

6.3 The board's role will not normally include the consideration and scrutiny of policies and strategies set by ministers. Rather, its advice will focus on the effectiveness of the systems in place to achieve their implementation. Separate processes are in place in respect of obtaining ministerial approval for policies and strategies.

- 6.4 The board should have an open and receptive approach to discussing and addressing risks across the Department and should be aware that a degree of managed risk taking is often necessary to enable a culture of innovation.

Matters delegated by the Board

- 6.5 The board has delegated certain matters to its relevant committees but expects to receive regular reports for approval or decision as necessary. Further details can be found in the terms of reference for each committee.

Types of information considered at Board meetings

- 6.6 The main categories of information considered at board meetings include:

- progress against annual business plan targets;
- progress and status of significant programmes / projects;
- performance against agreed metrics;
- risk management;
- scrutiny of performance of the department's executive agencies and ALBs; and
- management information relating to use of resources compared to budgets.

Written papers for consideration by correspondence

- 6.7 Exceptionally, where a board-approved response is required to a matter/issue by a deadline which precedes the next board meeting, with the agreement of the chair, a paper may be distributed by the board secretariat to board members for agreement by 'correspondence'. The content need not be further discussed but will be formally ratified, where appropriate at the next board meeting. Further information on this process can be found at Annex B.

6.8 There may be occasions where it is more suitable or necessary to consider papers via correspondence. This can be for a variety of reasons, including for example:

- where an urgent decision is needed, between normal scheduled meetings;
- where meetings have been cancelled or rescheduled, to prevent future meetings being overwhelmed;
- where a paper is a routine update and does not require formal discussion or consideration at board level; or
- to obtain the views of board members without need for decision or board wide discussion

SECTION 7 - SUPPORT AND BOARD EFFECTIVENESS

Support

- 7.1 Board secretariat support is provided by the Departmental Board team
DAERADepartmentalBoard@daera-ni.gov.uk
- 7.2 As determined by the board forward work programme, papers for discussion at each board meeting will be commissioned by the secretariat at least two weeks in advance.
- 7.3 An agenda and papers will be issued to board members at least one week in advance of each meeting.
- 7.4 Papers should be written and presented by directors or chairs of the relevant committees. Those written and presented by directors should be cleared by the relevant Grade 3/Chief Executive before being submitted.
- 7.5 The security classifications applied to papers indicate the sensitivity of information (in terms of the likely impact resulting from compromise, loss or misuse) and the need to defend against a broad profile of applicable threats.
- 7.6 The security classification marking applied should comply with DAERA Information Management guidance. Information which has not been marked will automatically be considered to be OFFICIAL. Information that may require procedural controls or restricted access, to reinforce the principle of 'need to know' should be marked OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE.
- 7.7 Minutes of board meetings will be agreed at the following meeting and published on the DAERA internet site (subject to any FOI and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) considerations).

Board member training

- 7.8 All new members will receive appropriate induction and training in their responsibilities as a board member.
- 7.9 Each NEBM, will be supported by an appropriate induction upon appointment, which will include meetings with the Chair and other key staff in the department and the provision of key documents such as this framework, and the department's most recent corporate and business plans.
- 7.10 The learning and development needs of board members will also be identified and addressed on an ongoing basis, normally as part of the annual appraisal process.

Board effectiveness evaluation

- 7.11 The board will conduct an annual evaluation of its performance with independent input at least every three years. This will include a review of the mix and balance of skills and understanding of board members to ensure they remain appropriate. The board will ensure that the results from annual performance reviews are acted upon.

SECTION 8 - RELATIONS WITH ARM'S LENGTH BODIES

- 8.1 The board is responsible for overseeing and monitoring the performance and financial position of each of the department's sponsored ALBs.
- 8.2 The board will have oversight of the working relationships, performance and risk management of its ALBs, through reports to ARAC and ensuring that 'Partnership and Engagement Plans' are in place for each. The board will ensure that any under performance in ALBs is addressed appropriately through the appropriate sponsorship arrangements.
- 8.3 The board, or appropriate members of the board as determined by the Chair based on the relevant function of the bodies, will meet at least annually with the following boards to discuss key strategic issues of mutual importance:
- Agri-food and Biosciences Institute;
 - Livestock and Meat Commission;
 - NI Fishery Harbour Authority; and
 - Loughs Agency of the Foyle Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC).

ANNEX A – COMMITTEE REPORTING TEMPLATE

Agenda Item XX	
Paper reference	To be included by board secretariat
Indicative timings	To be included by board secretariat
Presented by	Name of board member or senior official attending to present paper
FOI implications	xxxx
Protective marking	Insert description here along with short explanation as to why this is required. Minimum protective marking for DB papers is OFFICIAL.
Recommendation	xxxx
Attachments	Are there any attachments to this paper, i.e. Excel spreadsheet etc. Please attach these separately to the paper. Do not use embedded documents

*The text should be Arial size 12 unjustified with line spacing of 1.5. Papers should be no more than **four** pages long. Please ensure correct spelling, punctuation and grammar throughout; write acronyms in full at first use; and ensure that proofing language is set to UK English, not US English.*

PURPOSE

- Please state clearly the purpose of the paper, for example “The purpose of this paper is to seek the board’s agreement to...../ask for the board’s decision on...../ask the board to note...../seek the board’s view on.....”

DETAIL - BOARD COMMITTEE MEETINGS

2. In this section, add details of most recent meeting and provide a summary of the key issues discussed.
3. If you need help in determining whether a paper should be marked OFFICIAL or OFFICIAL – SENSITIVE, please speak to the Departmental Security Officer. Guidance is also available via this link:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1166145/Government_Security_Classifications_Policy_June_2023.pdf

ISSUES FOR ESCALATION/CONSIDERATION BY BOARD

4. Add details if there are any issues that need to be escalated/considered by the board and specify details of any decisions required from the board.
5. If there is crucial information that will help the board in reaching a decision, this can be provided in annexes to the paper (which should be provided separately and not as embedded documents).

RECOMMENDATION

6. Please summarise the recommendation being made to the board, ensuring that the wording is consistent with the wording used in the summary and reflects also the wording in the 'Purpose' section above.

INSERT NAME IN CAPITALS

Insert Business Area

Insert date paper was produced

ANNEX B – PROCEDURE FOR WRITTEN CORRESPONDENCE PAPERS

1. Papers to be circulated for consideration by correspondence should be written by directors and be submitted at any time, cleared through the relevant Grade 3 or, for NIEA, the chief executive.
2. Where a business area wishes to submit a paper to be considered by correspondence, it should contact the Departmental Board secretariat (DAERADepartmentalBoard@daera-ni.gov.uk) to confirm that this process would be appropriate for the circumstances.
3. A test of whether the paper relates to a new and untested initiative will be applied, as all such papers should normally be subject to discussion at a formal board meeting. All papers submitted to the secretariat must come through the appropriate board member.
4. Members will normally be given five working days to respond. A reminder will be sent to any members who have not responded by the deadline. Should responses remain outstanding after that extended period, it will be recorded that the member did not provide a comment.
5. A quorum of responses (6 including 1 NEBM) will be required before a paper is progressed for formal consideration by the board chair. Responses should be copied to all members to ensure they are sighted on all points being raised. If a quorum is not achieved, this may require an emergency board meeting to be called. The board chair will determine how to proceed.
6. On receipt of the required quorum of responses, the secretariat will collate responses into a single document which is submitted to chair, for their consideration alongside the correspondence paper itself.

7. Where there are questions raised in the comments, the board secretariat will liaise with the originating director to seek a response. Responses to the questions should be copied to the member raising the question and will then be included in the final collated document considered by the Chair.
8. On receipt of the Chair's comments, all comments are provided to the originating director, copied to all board members for information, and the process is closed. The secretariat will file all papers relating to the consideration of the correspondence paper in Content Manager.
9. Board members are updated at each meeting as to which papers have been cleared by written correspondence procedure and this is also recorded in the board minutes.