

NICS SENIOR LEADERSHIP GROUP (SLG)
Friday 24 July 2026, 09:00am
Executive Room, Stormont Castle

In attendance:

Neil Gibson (NG), Chair
Grainia Long (GL)
David Malcolm (DM)
Alex Gordon (AG)

Moira Doherty (MD)
Mike Farrar (MF)
Emer Morelli (EM)

Sean Holland (SH) obo Hugh Widdis
Mark Lee (ML) obo Ian Snowden
Julie Thompson (JT) obo Katrina Godfrey

Jayne Byrne (Secretariat)

1. Welcome and Apologies

Neil Gibson chaired in the absence of HoCS. Apologies received and noted as set out above. Apologies also received from Louise Crilly.

2. Minutes & Actions arising from SLG 10 July 2026

The minutes of the meeting of 10 July 2026 were agreed. Actions from the previous meetings were reviewed.

3. Civic Forum & SPG

Moira Doherty introduced the item, noting the Head of the Civil Service's commitment that SLG would consider the work of the SPG on an ongoing basis. Members discussed opportunities to align this work with the Ministers' Civic Forum, including the potential for external expertise to inform policy development and intervention design.

Members considered a number of issues that officials may wish to explore further as potential topics for future Civic Forum consideration, recognising that any decisions on the Forum's priorities and programme of work would be a matter for Ministers. It was agreed that Roisin Coleman would engage with Permanent Secretaries' offices to identify departmental points of contact to support this preparatory work.

Action: Roisin Coleman to engage with Permanent Secretaries' offices

4. NICS IAS Insight report – Records and Information Management

The NICS Internal Audit Service Insight report on Records and Information Management was circulated to SLG. HoCS requested assurance that all departments are implementing the report's recommendations. NG recommended that each Permanent Secretary provide a written note to HoCS by **21 August** confirming that the recommendations are being addressed. HoCS will then determine whether the matter requires further consideration by SLG.

Action: Permanent Secretaries to provide a written note to HoCS by **21 August** confirming that the recommendations in the IAS Insight report are being addressed.

5. Summer preparedness

EM provided an update on DfI preparations in advance of the Fleadh Cheoil 2026 which takes in Belfast from 2-9 August 2026. There is a meeting scheduled with the CX BCC on Tuesday for final assurances. Staff have been advised to use public transport if coming into Belfast during the week of the Fleadh.

ML advised that a member of his team is represented on the multi-agency group preparing for the Fleadh and confirmed that preparations are in hand, with no major concerns identified.

SH confirmed all necessary planning in place.

6. NI Budget Update

NG provided an update on engagement with UKG/NIO and the wider budget position. The Group discussed public sector pay and the implications a lack of budget clarity is having on service delivery.

DfE is considering the implications for Northern Ireland of the recent announcement on energy/electricity. The Prime Minister's announcements on business rates and transport fares were also discussed.

NG advised that HoCS plans to provide an update to the Executive on fiscal work. DoF will contact the relevant Permanent Secretaries for inputs on strands they are leading. HoCS also plans to hold bilateral meetings with Ministers on her return.

7. HR Update

7.1 Affordability Grip Exercise

NG provided an update on current vacancies and the potential increase in SCS posts. He advised that the Affordability Grip exercise remains in place and that HoCS requested written assurance from each Permanent Secretary by Friday 14 August confirming full implementation across their department. The matter will be discussed at SLG on Friday 21 August 2026.

Action: Each Permanent Secretary to provide written assurance to HoCS by Friday 14 August 2026 confirming that the Affordability Grip exercise is being fully implemented across their department.

7.2 Relevant Permanent Secretaries will be contacted by P&OD in relation to the review of the recruitment & retention allowances to ensure full compliance with the 3-year review cycle set out in the refreshed policy.

7.3 NG drew attention to the current G6 merit list; the current G3 competition; and G5 data collection.

8. Tour de table – by exception

8.1 **TEO:** MD advised an update on the communications review will be provided at a future SLG meeting.

- 8.2 **DoH:** MF updated on the Muckamore Abbey Inquiry and the ‘*This is Our Health*’ conversation which has now received feedback from 10,000 people – this could feed into a wider public service conversation – really good in engaging citizens across NI.
- 8.3 **DfE:** ML advised of the publication by the Utility Regulator of the outcome of its research and consultation into storm compensation (22 July) recommending no change **at this time** (retain NIE exemption), rather that the focus should be on investing in network resilience. DfE currently considering the implications of this.
- 8.4 **DoJ:** SH provided an update on legislation regarding deep fake pornography; good character references in crimes; increasing Prison population numbers.
- 8.5 **DAERA:** JT provided an update on industrial relations issues.
- 8.6 **DfC:** GL provided an update on Casement Park; letter from the homelessness organisations and extended thanks to the Group for their input into the anti-poverty strategy work.
- 8.7 **FLC:** AG (a) provided an update on the large number of live and pending Bills; (b) highlighted that early engagement on PMBs is essential; (c) mentioned matters of OLC recruitment and SPO vacancies.
- 8.8 **DE:** DM referenced the Controlled Schools Bill and thanked OLC colleagues for their work on this.
9. **AOB**
- 9.1 NG advised that commissioning for Birthday Honours 2027 nominations has issued for consideration by SLG.
- 9.2 Reminder of nominations needed for the Departmental and Agency Audit and Risk Assurance Committees for inclusion on the central list.
10. **Date of next SLG meeting**
Next meeting: Friday 31 July at 09:00 in the Executive Room.

Meeting closed 10.50am