



**Minutes of Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Meeting No. 70
Held on Tuesday 8 September 2026 at 10.00, via Video Conference**

Present:

Hugh McKeag, Commissioner (Chair)
Alan Hunter, Commissioner
Leanne McCullough, Commissioner
Caron Alexander, Independent member

In Attendance:

Frances McCandless, Chief Executive
Aubrey McCrory, Head of Corporate Services
Nicola Fisher, Finance and Admin Manager
Ciara McCann, Finance and Admin Officer (minutes)
Barry Mitchell, Northern Ireland Audit Office
Barney Conway, Sumer Accounting NI
Michael Woods, DfC Internal Audit
Peter Murchan, DfC Internal Audit
Patrick Mackey, DfC Internal Audit
Judith Woodburn, DfC Voluntary and Community Division (observer)

Apologies: None

The meeting commenced at 10.00am

1. Minutes of Meeting No 69

The minutes of the Audit and Risk Assurance (ARAC) Committee meeting number 69 held on 5 May 2026 were previously agreed by correspondence, and it was noted all actions were progressed.

2. Conflicts of Interest

The Chair reminded all present of the need to raise any conflicts of interest. None recorded at the outset of the meeting.

3. Chair's Comments

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and highlighted the main agenda items for consideration and recommendation to the Board. It was agreed that item 8 would be taken at the end of the meeting, and going forward the same sequence followed in future years.

4. Six-month assurance statement

The Chief Executive introduced the report and highlighted several comments. A number of queries regarding contracting and the budget overspend position were discussed, including ongoing liaison with sponsor team. It was agreed to recommend the assurance statement, subject to minor amendment, to the Board as proposed by Alan Hunter and seconded by Leanne McCullough.

AP1: Amended six-month assurance statement to be recommended to Board for approval.

5. Review of Finance Procedures

Nicola Fisher (Finance and Admin Manager) introduced the review report and highlighted various updates as outlined in the cover paper. Following a query the Committee accepted advice from sponsor department regarding the use of a proportionate approach to business cases. The Committee discussed its role in scrutinising changes to the corporate risk register which it reported to the Accounting Officer and the Board. Following discussion, the Committee agreed to recommend the updated finance procedures, subject to minor amendment, to the Board as proposed by Leanne McCullough and seconded by Caron Alexander.

The Committee noted its thanks to the Finance and Admin Manager for their work on the review.

AP2: Updated finance procedures to be recommended to Board for approval.

6. 2026/27 Corporate Risk Register & Action Plan (including deep dive into risk 3)

The Chief Executive introduced the register and outlined three proposed increases to risk ratings. The Committee discussed the detailed reasons which related to insufficient budget, staff turnover, progressing two significant projects and delays in the department bringing forward legislative proposals. After discussion the Committee agreed to recommend the risk register to the Board as proposed by Caron Alexander and seconded by Leanne McCullough.

It was agreed to discuss risk 3 further under agenda item 9.

AP3: Corporate Risk Register to be recommended to Board for approval.

7. NIAO Report to those charged with governance

Barry Mitchell noted the 2025/26 report was straightforward and handed over to Barney Conway who highlighted the letter of representation and confirmed a satisfactory unqualified overall audit opinion. The auditors thanked Commission staff for their input during the process.

The Chair welcomed the report and thanked the auditors and also recognised the work done by Nicola Fisher and the Corporate Services team for all their work to secure a clean audit opinion. It was agreed to recommend the audit report to the Board as proposed by Hugh McKeag and seconded by Leanne McCullough.

AP4: NIAO report to be brought to Board for information.

8. Cyber Security Update

The Head of Corporate Services highlighted cyber developments since the last update and outlined steps to further enhance cyber security as part of the digital forms project, including wider use of sub domains. The Committee noted updates to the cyber assessment in Annex A to reflect new supplier arrangements and asked that updates to ARAC were also included.

AP5: Cyber assessment Annex A to up updated.

9. Budget

The Finance and Admin Manager introduced the update and highlighted the projected year end revenue budget pressure was £287k. It was noted this figure did not include spend related to a business case for additional enquiry team resources which was with sponsor team. The Committee discussed new arrangements for IT Assist charging the Commission directly for end user devices and the lack of an internal budget transfer.

10. Audit recommendations implementation report

The Committee noted a recommendation from the second assignment in 2025/26 was included. It was agreed to mark this complete and clear the recommendation when all four elements were completed.

11. Committee self-assessment

The Chief Executive outlined the approach and Commissioners agreed to convene to review the template.

AP6: AO to identify a suitable meeting date for the Committee to complete the self-assessment.

12. DoF Annual Fraud Report

The Committee noted that reports for 2022/23 and 2023/24 had been received and these were a useful resource to identify issues for the Commission and the charity sector to be aware of.

13. Review conditions attached to business case approvals

The Head of Corporate Services noted details of current approved business cases and the contracts register were set out in the paper. An update on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) projects and the accommodation business case progress was provided. Arrangements for closure of Marlborough House and planned site visits to the new location were outlined. The Committee noted lease drafting had not yet been concluded. While recognising that a move in date could not yet be confirmed, the Committee asked that the Board receive an outline of the remaining relocation actions.

AP7: Outline of remaining office move actions to be provided to Board.

14. Review of Gifts and Hospitality Register

Details of the register were noted.

15. DAO and FD letters summary

Update noted.

16. Fraud and concerns about Commission report

The Head of Corporate Services confirmed there had been no internal frauds or concerns about the Commission.

17. AOB

The Committee recognised the period of uncertainty and pressures that staff are operating under.

18. Issues for next meeting 24 Nov 2026

Items agreed included:

- Assurance check of MOUs/SLAs.
- Summary of self-assessment exercise.
- Review information security policy.
- Review Raising Concerns about Commission policy.
- Review Conflicts of Interest Policy.

Staff left the meeting at 11.20am

8. Meeting with members and auditors without staff present.

Committee members met with representatives of external and internal audit and discussed their opinions on the past year and offered some thoughts about potential future areas of audit. Auditors were satisfied with the support they received from the Commission's management and staff. External auditors reiterated the potential risks identified in the current risk register, particularly operational risks associated with the budget.

Meeting ended at 11.37am

Audit & Risk Committee
Register of Outstanding Action Points

Committee Meeting and Action Point Number	Date Raised	Agenda Item	Action	Owners	Status
70 (1)	08/09/26	4	Amended six-month assurance statement to be recommended to Board for approval.	CEX	Complete
70 (2)	08/09/26	5	Updated finance procedures to be recommended to Board for approval.	F&AM/ HCorpS	Complete
70 (3)	08/09/26	6	Corporate Risk Register to be recommended to Board for approval.	HCorpS	Complete
70 (4)	08/09/26	7	NIAO report to be brought to Board for information.	HCorpS	Complete
70 (5)	08/09/26	8	Cyber assessment annex A to up updated.	HCorpS	Complete
70 (6)	08/09/26	11	AO to identity a suitable meeting date for ARAC to complete self-assessment	AO	Underway
70 (7)	08/09/26	13	Outline of remaining office move actions to be provided to Board.	HCorpS	Complete