

**Minutes of Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting No. 67
Held on Tuesday 25 November 2025 at 14:00 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 & Admin Manager
Ciara McCann, Finance & Admin Officer (minutes)
Barry Mitchell, Northern Ireland Audit Office
Barney Conway, Sumer Accounting NI
Michael Woods, DfC Internal Audit
Peter Murchan, DfC Internal Audit
Karen Mills, DfC Voluntary and Community Division (observer)

Apologies: None

The meeting commenced at 14:00. The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

1. Minutes of Meeting No 66

The minutes of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) meeting number 66 held on 27 August 2025 were previously agreed by correspondence and approved for publication by the Board on 22 September 2025. Progress on actions noted.

2. Conflicts of Interest

None recorded.

3. Chair's Comments

The Chair highlighted a meeting on Thursday 13 November of Department for Communities (DfC) Arms-Length Bodies (ALB) ARAC Chairs' Forum. Details of presentations and key take aways including DfC's risk management and assurance approach were outlined.

AP1: ALB ARAC Chair's Forum presentations to be circulated to Commissioners.

4. Corporate Risk Register

The Chief Executive introduced the register and outlined two changes proposed by Senior Management Team (SMT) to increase Risk 1 and Risk 4. Following discussion, the Committee agreed to recommend an amended register to the Board as proposed by Leanne McCullough and seconded by Alan Huter.

AP2: Amended Corporate Risk Register to be recommended to Board for approval.

5. Review of Information Security Policy

The Head of Corporate Services introduced the policy and various updates over recent years. Caron Alexander indicated she was content with the Commission's approach, and following discussion the Committee agreed to keep the policy as it currently is.

6. Review of Concerns about the Commission policy

The Head of Corporate Services highlighted a further update by Department of Finance to the Northern Ireland Civil Service wide approach. A number of further minor amendments to the Commission's Concerns about the Commission policy (formerly known as whistleblowing) were suggested. Following discussion, it was agreed to recommend the proposed policy to the Board, subject to minor amendment, as proposed by Alan Hunter and seconded by Caron Alexander.

AP3: Revised Concerns about the Commission policy to be recommended to Board for approval.

7. Risk Policy Review Briefing

The Head of Corporate Services explained previous changes to align the Commission's risk management approach with the Treasury's Orange Book. The Finance & Admin Manager presented results from testing DfC's Excel-based Principal Risk Register, which uses more risk categories and appetites but retains the four-by-four matrix the Commission uses for reporting. After discussing resources required to implement DfC's approach across the Commission and whether the new format would help ARAC and the Board manage risk, it was agreed to keep the current approach for now. Staff will liaise with DfC about how group/directorate registers feed into the principal register and its reporting to DfC's Board. The Chair thanked the Finance & Admin Manager for the briefing and preparation.

AP4: Liaise with DfC about how group/directorate registers feed into their principal register and its reporting to DfC's Board.

8. Internal Audit Assignment 1 - 2025/26

Peter Murchan noted fieldwork on the first assignment was completed and a report was being drafted. At this time there were no significant issues with some minor points being considered around rationalising customer care standards. Peter confirmed a draft report should be with the Commission before the Christmas break.

9. Budget

The Finance & Admin Manager gave an update and highlighted anticipated overspend related to increases in contractual obligations. Bids to address these and a number of priority areas of work were made in October for the December monitoring. The Committee noted two bids were subsequently withdrawn by SMT after DfC Finance team indicated allocations could be received at the start of quarter 4.

10. Summary of Committee self-assessment

The Chief Executive outlined the results of the recent exercise which identified no substantial issues or recommendations. Barry Mitchell addressed some queries about the new NIAO template.

11. Review of business case approvals, contracts and agreements

The Head of Corporate Services highlighted information added to the update report following DAO (DoF) 05/21 on Departments and ALBs - Contracts Register. The Committee noted the previous approach was cleared by audit and welcomed plans to include Memorandum of Understanding and Service Level Agreements with financial governance implications as strengthening assurance.

Updates were given on legal and capital spend. The Committee discussed relocation and noted staff and Karen Mills' views on delays in finalising floor plans and lease drafting. Committee members noted the significant timescale and that other relocation projects were progressing ahead of the Commission's, albeit also at a slow pace. Following discussion sponsor department was asked to help escalate engagement between those responsible for property negotiations to ensure a timely resolution of outstanding issues.

AP5: Sponsor department to help escalate engagement between those responsible for property negotiations.

12. Audit recommendations implementation report

The Committee noted progress in clearing all recommendations to date and that the second audit assignment this year would review previous recommendations to give further assurance to the committee.

13. DAO and FD letters summary

Update noted.

14. Fraud and concerns about Commission report

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

15. AOB

The Committee agreed to hold the next meeting in person. The Committee passed on their thanks to all staff for all their ongoing hard work.

16. Issues for next meeting 10 March 2026

- Risk appetite for new business plan objectives
- Review Terms of Reference and meeting schedule
- Review Fraud policy (including Bribery risk assessment annual)
- Review Risk management policy
- IA Assignment 1 report and update on second assignment
- IA Plan 2026/27
- Update on 9-month accounts
- NIAO audit strategy
- Cyber security update

Meeting ended at 16:00.

Audit & Risk Committee

Register of Outstanding Action Points

Committee Meeting and Action Point Number	Date Raised	Agenda Item	Action	Owners	Status
67 (1)	25/11/25	3	ALB ARAC Chair's Forum presentations to be circulated to Commissioners.	Chair	Underway
67 (2)	25/11/25	4	Amended Corporate Risk Register to be recommended to Board for approval.	HoCS	Underway
67 (3)	25/11/25	6	Revised Concerns policy to be recommended to Board for approval.	HoCS	Underway
67 (4)	25/11/25	7	Liase with DfC about how group/directorate registers feed into their principal register and its reporting to DfC's Board.	HoCS	Underway
67 (5)	25/11/25	11	Sponsor department to help escalate engagement between those responsible for	HoCS	Underway

			property negotiations.		
65 (7)	13/05/25	11	The CEx, Chair and Head of Internal Audit to develop a new three year strategy.	CEx	Underway