



Department for

**Communities**

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# Corporate Governance Framework

July 2021 (Version 1)



# Contents

<b>Foreword DfC Permanent Secretary, Tracy Meharg.....</b>	<b>4</b>
1. Introduction and Scope of the DfC Corporate Governance Framework.....	6
2. What is Corporate Governance?.....	7
3. Governance Principles and Values we all must follow as public servants.....	10
4. The Machinery of Government, where DfC receives its authority to function.....	11
5. How DfC is structured for delivery.....	12
6. Governance Structures Overview.....	14
7. Risk Management and Internal Control .....	19
8. Making Decisions in the Public Interest.....	23
9. List of Annexes (provided separately).....	26

## Foreword from Our Permanent Secretary, Tracy Meharg



**I** am really pleased to introduce this Corporate Governance Framework which recognises the Department’s commitment to a sound system of corporate governance, and supports our people with a reliable foundation upon which to make business decisions.

The Department for Communities (DfC) provides a service which impacts the lives of many people across Northern Ireland. Managing public funds of around £7 billion, the Department employs some 8,600 people, and we each have a key role to play in maintaining a strong corporate governance environment, and building public confidence in the role the Department plays in delivering services for our communities.

Our departmental business plan defines the common purpose of DfC as “**Supporting people, Building communities, Shaping places**”. I believe it is the collective commitment to good governance and exemplary application of the principles of public life displayed by all of our people, which enables the Department to deliver its strategic aims, objectives and priorities in an accountable and transparent way.

This Corporate Governance Framework has been developed to provide transparency and clarity on the way the Department is directed and controlled and aims to support our people in the application of best practice principles. It has been designed to help individuals ensure business is conducted in accordance with our statutory obligations, public money is safeguarded, resources are used economically, and an efficient and effective service is provided to the public of Northern Ireland. It also provides the people we serve with a transparent insight into the governance arrangements in place.

The framework sets out the principles and values we must all follow as public servants and explains the Machinery of Government through which the Department receives its authority to function. It outlines the organisational and governance structures established within the Department and

the interconnection between governance, risk management and internal control. The framework points our people to the governance guidance in place to support decision making in the public interest which is reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure DfC remains at the forefront of best practice.

The Departmental Management Board (the Board), and the **Department's Senior Team** recognise and are committed to providing the necessary leadership to set the tone, and to reinforce the importance of good governance across the Department and its Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs).



**Tracy Meharg**

# 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The DfC Corporate Governance Framework is intended as a guide for everyone within the Department. It also provides a transparent insight for the public as a whole on the governance structures and arrangements in place. The framework is underpinned by our standards of conduct which form the pillars on which the framework stands.
- 1.2 The Framework details the established organisational and governance structures and describes the roles and responsibilities of those charged with governance. It explains the Machinery of Government through which the Department receives its authority to function and the interconnection between governance, risk management and internal control. It explains the 'Three Lines of Defence' model, the role of front line management as a first line of defence, and how the overall model serves those charged with governance.

Embodied throughout this framework are the values and standards of ethical behaviour which are instilled at all levels of the Department to ensure an effective, efficient and accountable service is delivered to the people of Northern Ireland.

- 1.3 The framework is a tool for staff across the Department and signposts to specific guidance, policies and arrangements that support us in making decisions in the public interest.
- 1.4 In addition it allows us to provide transparency that, as a Department, we are committed to high standards of governance that are consistent with the key principles of evolving best practice.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.5 The Framework is a living document, kept under continual review, to ensure that DfC remains at the forefront of best practice. Board review and approval of the framework occurs on a biennial basis (with more frequent review if required).

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<sup>1</sup> Corporate Governance in Central Government Departments: **Code of Good Practice NI 2013, Managing Public Money Northern Ireland** and **Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Handbook (NI)** HMT Orange Book: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/orange-book>

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## 2. What is Corporate Governance?

In simple terms, corporate governance refers to the way in which we ensure that we are doing the right things, in the right way, for the right people, in a manner that upholds the ethics and values of public service.

- 2.1 Corporate governance is commonly defined as the way in which an organisation is directed and controlled. It relates to the distribution of rights and responsibilities among the different stakeholders and participants in the organisation, and determines the rules and procedures for making decisions. This includes the process by which organisational objectives are set, resources are controlled and performance and risks are monitored and assessed.
- 2.2 Risk management is an essential part of governance and leadership and fundamental to how an organisation is directed, managed and controlled at all levels.
- 2.3 Effective corporate governance in the public sector encourages better decision making, more effective use of resources and strengthens accountability for the stewardship of those resources. Effective corporate governance is about improving public sector performance, more effective implementation of chosen interventions, better service delivery and better outcomes.
- 2.4 The Governance Statement, which supplements the annual accounts each year, explains the framework of governance and risk management operated within DfC. The DfC Accounting Officer is required to assess the effectiveness of the Department's system of internal control and confirm that it has operated effectively throughout the year. This assessment is disclosed within the Governance Statement.

2.5 Planning, Risk Management, Internal Control and Assurance are the interconnected components of governance arrangements as set out in the diagram below.

**Planning** is about setting and communicating organisational objectives, including the means of attaining objectives and monitoring performance;

**Risk Management** is an integral part of planning and decision making. Risk is the effect of uncertainty on objectives. Management identify, assess and manage risks and opportunities in order to achieve objectives;

**Internal Control** is the framework of processes, policies, procedures and activities established by management

to maintain and modify risks and opportunities. Management execute internal control on a day to day basis, with reporting on variations so corrective action can be taken to do more of what works or to address deficiencies/get back on track;

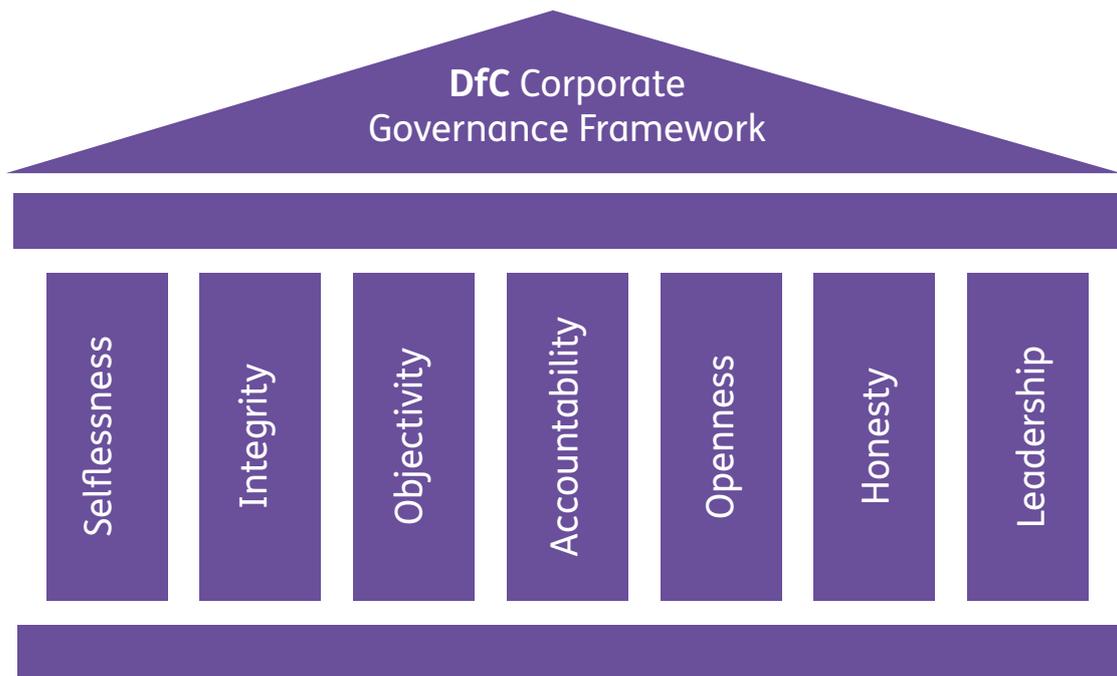
**Assurance** is about the confidence that can be placed on the operation of risk management and internal control. It is based on the objective assessment of information/evidence relating to the successful conduct of activities, efficient and effective design and operation of internal controls, compliance with internal and external requirements and the production of insightful and credible information to support decision making.



### 3. Governance Principles and Values we all must follow as public servants

3.1 Key to working in and with the Department is a core set of values which define the culture and behaviours we all fundamentally uphold as public servants. Founded on the ‘Seven Principles of Public Life’ (**Annex A**) these values set the standards which are expected to be displayed by all DfC staff and are the foundation upon which we have built our approach to governance. They are at the core of our public service role, and underpin DfC’s Governance structures and arrangements.

3.2 The following illustration shows the collective importance of each of these values, standing together as the pillars which uphold the DfC Corporate Governance Framework. The values are focused on culture and behaviour, with less emphasis on process and control. It is the responsibility of each individual member of DfC to embrace them as a guide to their self-conduct and decision making to ensure the Department delivers its strategic aims, objectives and priorities in an accountable and transparent way.

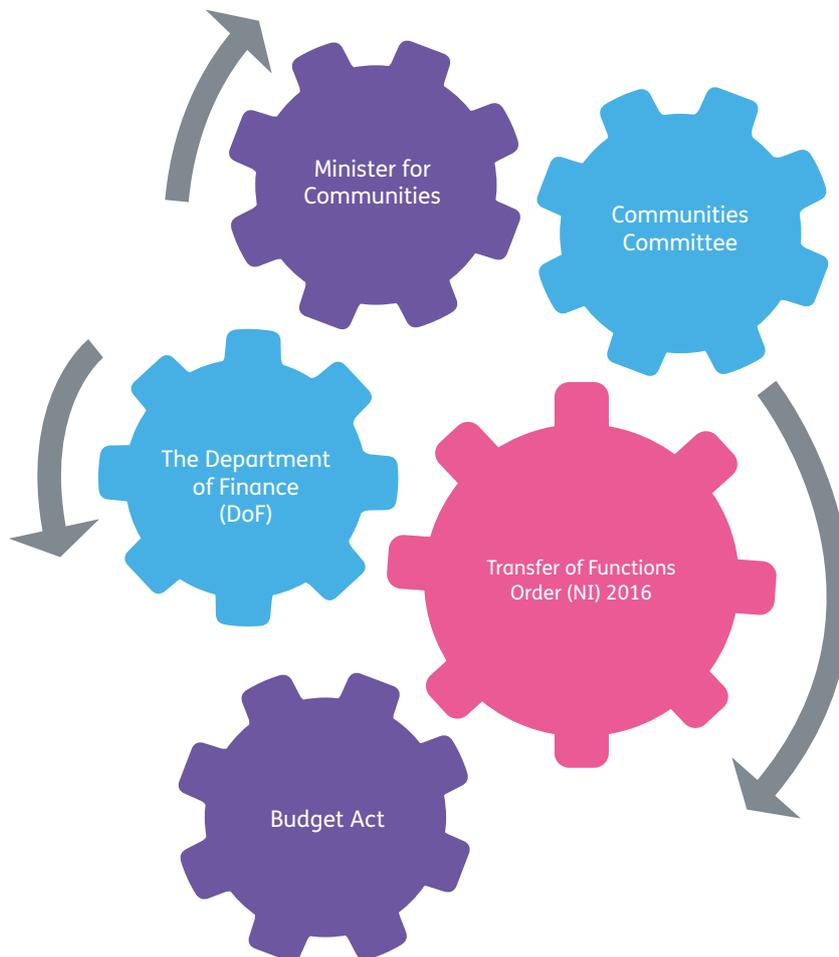


## 4. The Machinery of Government: Where The Department receives its Authority to Function

4.1 All functions of the Department are exercised subject to Ministerial and Assembly direction, and are conducted in accordance with the authority provided by relevant legislation. The following illustration shows the inter-connected

relationship of legislation and direction which allows the Department to function and to conduct its business.

4.2 Please note, further detail is provided in respect of each cog below at **Annex B** of this framework.



## 5. How DfC is Structured for Delivery



### The Department

- 5.1 The DfC Common Purpose of **‘Supporting People, Building Communities, Shaping Places’** is achieved through activities within housing and community regeneration; community engagement encompassing the arts, sport, museums and libraries, and cultural activities; helping people into the labour market; countering poverty and promoting social inclusion.
- 5.2 The Department is committed to achieving this common purpose, demonstrable in outcomes of a healthy housing market, a social welfare system, access to training and support for job seekers, bringing divided communities together, effective public services, reduced poverty, and a more equal society.
- 5.3 The Department is organised into five Groups. Each Group is responsible for policy and service delivery for their areas of business. Individual Groups are led by a Deputy Secretary each of whom reports to the DfC Permanent Secretary/Accounting Officer.

### Relationship with Arm’s Length Bodies

- 5.4 Across the 5 Groups DfC works in partnership with a wide range of Arm’s Length Bodies (ALBs), including advisory and regulatory bodies, as part of a total delivery system within the same ministerial portfolio. Partnership working between the Department and its ALBs is based on the principles of openness, honesty and trust, mutual understanding of risk and strategic alignment of objectives.
- 5.5 Each ALB is an entity in its own right, employing its own staff and operating at arm’s length from the Department. Each will operate its own corporate governance framework reflecting good practice requirements including clear governance structures and reporting arrangements.
- 5.6 The current list of DfC ALBs is included at **Annex M**.

## DfC Total Delivery System

### DfC 5 Group Departmental Structure

Managing £7b of Public Funds

Employing around 8,600 Staff

Engaged Communities Group	Work & Health Group	Housing, Urban Regeneration & Local Government Group	Strategic Policy & Professional Services Group	Supporting People Group
<p>Supporting People through the delivery of substantial and lasting change across all communities. Delivered through its work with community and voluntary organisations, cultural and sporting activities, and social heritage.</p>	<p>Providing a wide range of Social Security and Work and Wellbeing functions to meet the needs of citizens, and deliver an outcomes based approach as part of the Programme for Government (PfG).</p>	<p>Supporting people, strengthen communities and improving lives. Providing decent, affordable sustainable homes and housing support to tackle area based deprivation and bring divided communities together.</p>	<p>Providing business areas with timely quality advice, policy development, guidance and information. Promoting cohesive achievement of departmental resources, providing a challenge and reporting function to ensure the effective deployment of public resources under the Department's control.</p>	<p>Delivering an outcomes based approach in line with the Programme for Government (PfG), the Group is responsible for Pensions, Disability &amp; Carers Service, Child Maintenance Service (NI and GB), Benefit Uptake, Debt Management, Fraud &amp; Error and Information Services &amp; Property Management.</p>
<p>Composed of a six directorate structure, each reporting to a Grade 5 Director.</p>	<p>Composed of a five directorate structure, each reporting to a G5 Director.</p>	<p>Composed of a six directorate structure, each reporting to a G5 Director.</p>	<p>Composed of a Six directorate structure, each reporting to a G5 Director or G6 Deputy Director.</p>	<p>Composed of a three directorate structure, each reporting to a G5 Director.</p>

Each of the above DfC Groups is headed by a Deputy Secretary reporting to the Permanent Secretary / Accounting Officer

### DfC Arm's Length Bodies / Advisory Bodies

Managing £365m of Public Funds

Employing around 3,800 Staff

5.7 Further details on DfC Groups can be found at the following locations:

**DfC Internal Intranet:**

[nics.intranet.nigov.net/communities/campaigns/dfc-management-structure](https://nics.intranet.nigov.net/communities/campaigns/dfc-management-structure)

**DfC External Internet:**

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/about-department-communities>

## 6. Governance Structures

### Departmental Management Board and Committee Structure

- 6.1 The Department operates under the direction and control of the Minister for Communities. The Minister is responsible and accountable to the Assembly for the policies, programmes and actions of the Department.
- 6.2 The DfC Permanent Secretary is the principal advisor to the Minister, the administrative head of the Department and the Departmental Accounting Officer. The Accounting Officer is personally responsible and accountable for the effective management and organisation of the Department, the efficient and effective use of its resources and the stewardship of its assets.

### Departmental Management Board

- 6.3 The Permanent Secretary as Accounting Officer has established a Departmental Management Board (the Board). The Board operates as a collegiate committee under the leadership of the Permanent Secretary. It supports and where appropriate, challenges

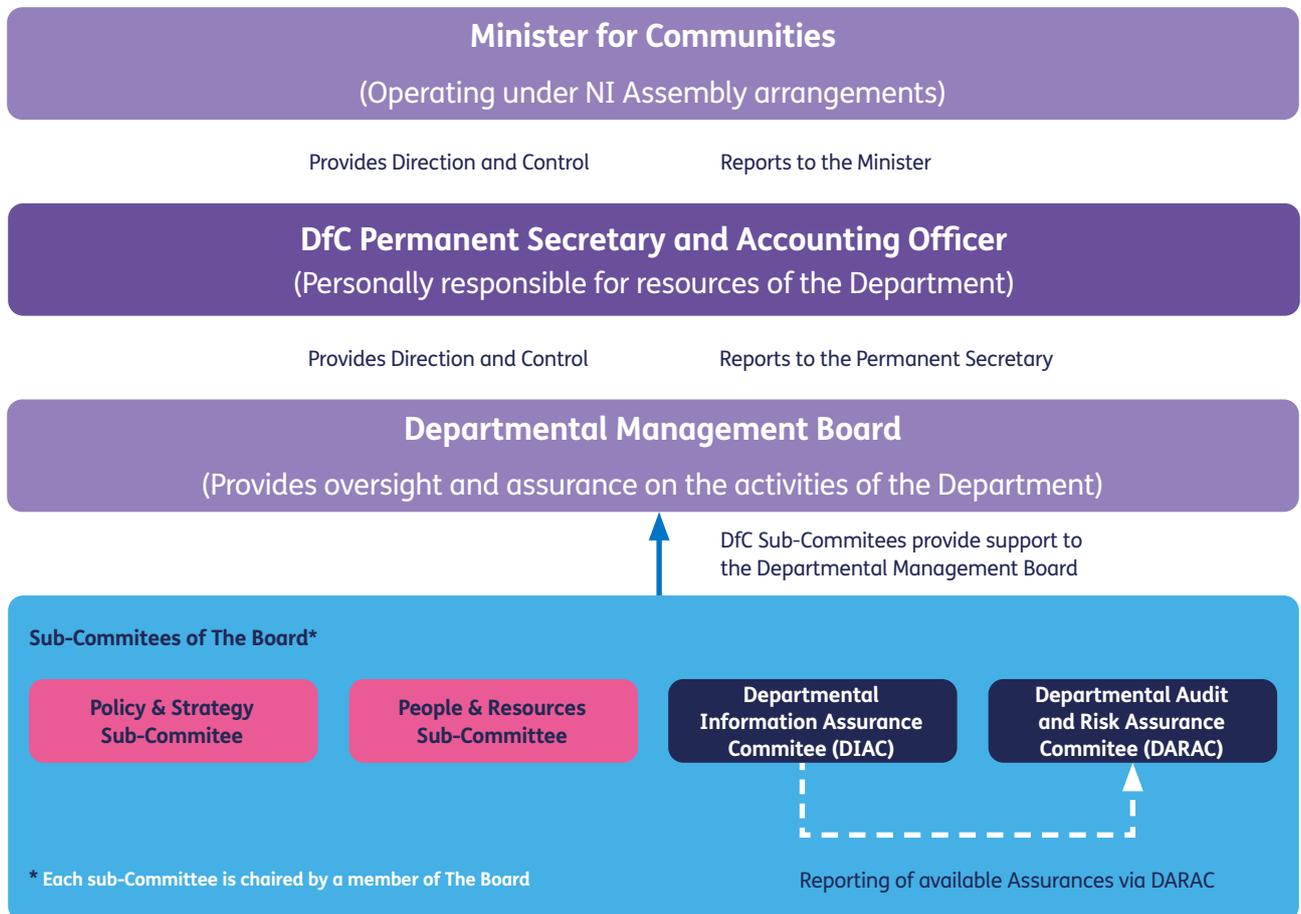
the Permanent Secretary's oversight of the Department, including the Department's corporate governance arrangements. As policy is determined by the Minister, it is the role of the Board to advise on policy, and oversee the policies and plans of the Department.

- 6.4 The Board meets every six weeks excluding July and December. It is chaired by the Permanent Secretary, comprises all Deputy Secretaries of the Department and two Non-Executive Board Members (who also act as Chair and Deputy Chair of the Departmental Audit and Risk Assurance Committee). Finance Directors whilst not Board members, will also be in attendance at meetings. The Board is also regularly attended by the NICS HR Business Partner with other DfC Directors attending as required.
- 6.5 A 'Departmental Management Board Operating Framework' sets out in detail the functions, aims and responsibilities of the Board and its membership. This document has been included for reference in [Annex D](#) of this Framework.

## Sub-Committees of the Board

6.6 The Board is supported in its functions by a number of sub-committees as

outlined in the diagram below. Sub-committee Terms of Reference are included in **Annexes F, H, J & K**, with sample Board and sub-committee agendas included at **Annexes E, G and I**.



- 6.7 Sample Board and Committee agendas have been included at **Annex E, G and I** of this Framework.

### **Departmental Audit & Risk Assurance Committee (DARAC)**

- 6.8 The DARAC has been established by the Board to support it in its responsibilities for issues of risk, control and governance across the Department. DARAC carries out this function through a robust review of the comprehensiveness of assurances available in meeting the Board and Accounting Officers assurance needs, and a review of the reliability and integrity of these assurances.
- 6.9 DARAC meets four times a year with additional Audit Focus Sessions arranged where appropriate to allow more detailed consideration of specified topic areas, for example the Annual Report and Accounts.
- 6.10 DARAC is comprised of two Non-Executive Board members, acting as Chair and Vice Chair, and two independent members. Departmental officials including the Deputy Secretary for Strategic Policy and Professional Services attend each Committee meeting with other Deputy Secretaries attending on a rotational basis. The NIAO and the Head of Internal Audit also attend each meeting.

### **Departmental Information Assurance Committee (DIAC)**

- 6.11 DIAC, established under the Strategic Information Assurance Framework, supports the Accounting Officer and the Board in overseeing and carrying out their responsibilities for the effective and secure use of data in support of the aims of the Department. DIAC will, in addition to the support outlined, provide information assurances to the Board through DARAC.
- 6.12 DIAC meets quarterly in advance of DARAC. It is chaired by the Senior Information Risk Owner (SIRO) for the Department, and is comprised of the Information Officer, IT Security Officer, Departmental Accreditor, Head of Internal Audit, and Head of the Analytical Services Board.

### **People & Resources Sub-Committee**

- 6.13 The People and Resources Sub-Committee is chaired at Deputy Secretary level and meets at least quarterly. The focus for this Committee is to support the Accounting Officer and the Board in the strategic management of the Department's human resources planning and associated funding.

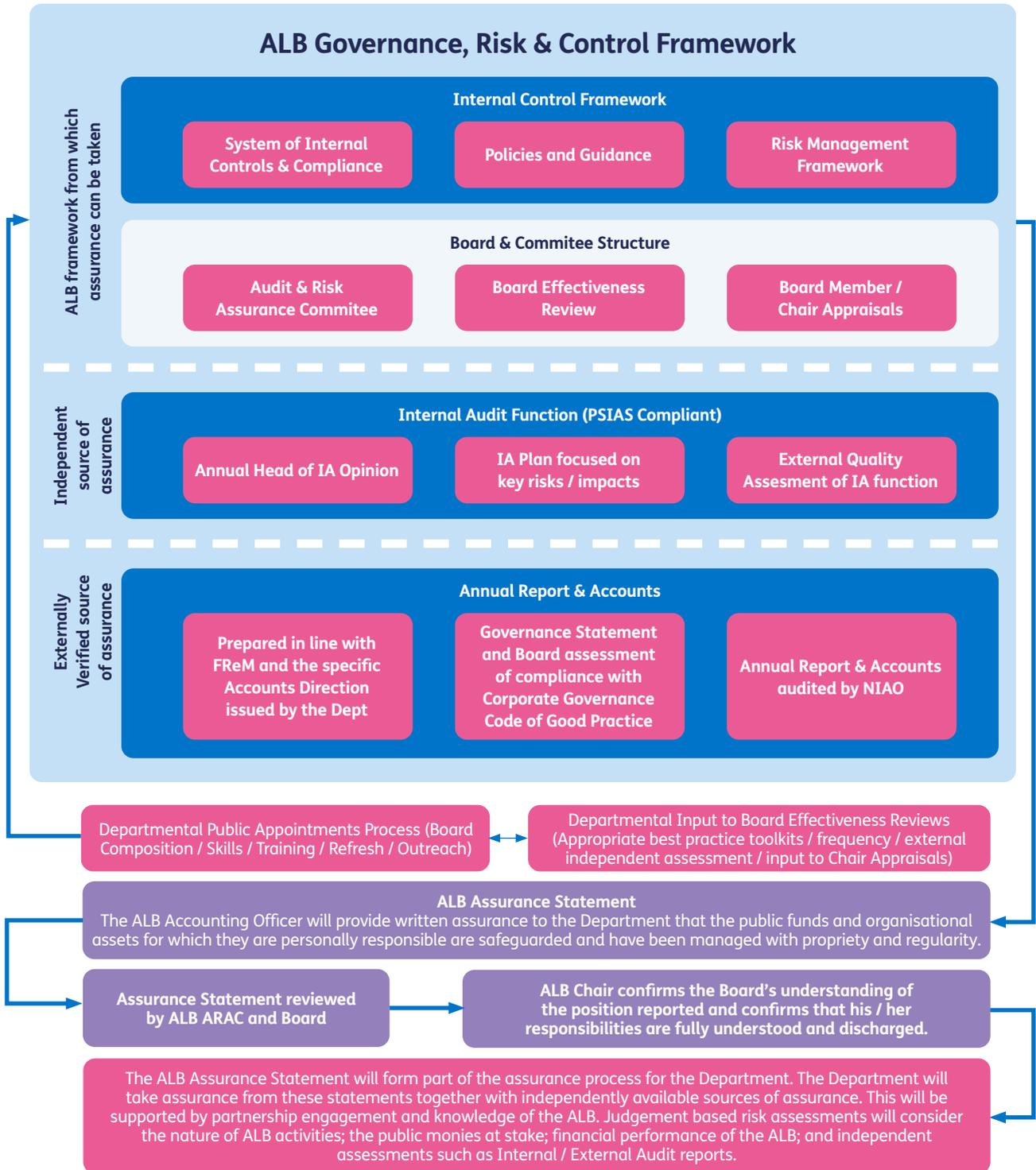
## Policy & Strategy Sub-Committee

6.14 The Policy and Strategy Sub-Committee is chaired at Deputy Secretary level and meets quarterly in line with the business planning timetable. This Committee oversees, scrutinises and monitors policy development, delivery and evaluation across DfC, in line with Programme for Government (PfG), ministerial commitments and departmental strategic priorities. It also agrees professional support services required to support policy development and operational delivery.

## Governance Arrangements within ALBs

6.15 DfC ALBs have their own Corporate Governance Frameworks in line with relevant best practice guidance. Frameworks will include the governance structures established and the internal control and risk management arrangements in place. An account of governance arrangements and their effectiveness is provided in the annual governance statement for each ALB.

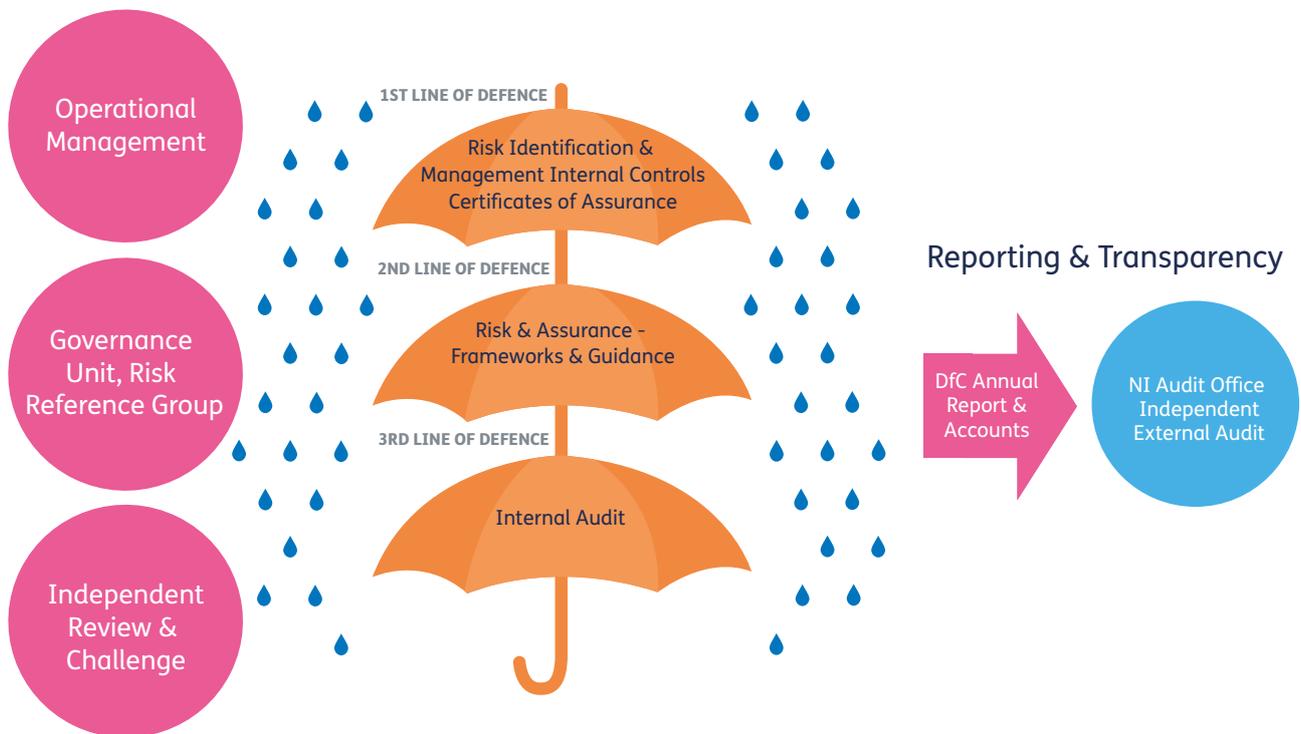
6.16 The following diagram outlines the ALB Governance, Risk and Control Framework and the assurances the Department receives on its effective operation.



# 7. Risk Management and Internal Control

7.1 The Department has well established internal control, risk management and assurance arrangements. These are focused around a ‘Three Lines of Defence governance model’ to safeguard against risks which threaten successful achievement of departmental objectives and effective public service delivery.

7.2 The diagram below shows the Three Lines of Defence which serve senior management and the Board who are collectively responsible and accountable for setting the Department’s objectives, defining strategies to achieve those objectives and establishing roles, structures and processes to best manage the risks in achieving objectives successfully.



## 1st Line of Defence

- 7.3 The 1st line of defence is provided by front line departmental staff and the various layers of operational management in place across each of the five departmental Groups. Under the 1st line of defence management have primary ownership, responsibility and accountability for identifying, assessing and managing risks. The first line 'own' the risks, and are responsible for execution of the organisation's response to those risks through the operation of internal controls on a day-to-day basis and implementation of corrective actions to address deficiencies.
- 7.4 Through a cascading responsibility structure, managers design, operate and improve processes, policies, procedures, activities, devices, practices, or other conditions and/or actions that maintain and/or modify risks and supervise effective execution. There should be adequate managerial and supervisory controls in place to ensure compliance and to highlight control breakdown, variations in or inadequate processes and unexpected events, supported by routine performance and compliance information. Operational managers monitor the performance of daily branch activities, conduct compliance checks on controls and assess the

effectiveness of internal controls in operation. Managers will then report on the performance of controls and escalate issues as appropriate through the departmental assurance process.

- 7.5 Other operational controls in this 1st line of defence include 'Business Planning', 'Budgeting & in-year monitoring' and 'HR Performance Management'. These controls ensure the objectives of individual staff and the daily activities of operational business areas are strategically aligned. Operational managers are also responsible for developing a culture which reflects the high levels of ethical standards established in the 'Seven Principles of Public Life'. **(Annex A)**

## 2nd Line of Defence

- 7.6 The 2nd line of defence consists of functions and activities that monitor and facilitate the implementation of effective risk management practices and the reporting of adequate risk related information up and down the organisation. The 2nd line supports the 1st line to ensure that risks are effectively managed. Within DfC the Governance Unit provides a 2nd line function, maintaining Risk and Assurance Frameworks and guidance and providing a challenge function on behalf of the Board.

- 7.7 DfC has also established a Risk Reference Group as part of its 2nd line of defence. The Group supports the Board in its responsibility for determining and continuously assessing the nature and extent of the principal risks that the Department is exposed to and is willing to take to achieve its objectives. The Group oversees risk management arrangements within the Department, reviewing Risk Reports for the Board, assessing linkages between principal risks and strategic objectives and determining the need for escalation of any Group level or emerging risks. Terms of Reference for the Group are provided in [Annex L](#).
- 7.8 An Assurance Framework operating within the Department and inclusive of the Department's ALBs, outlines the arrangements by which each of the five DfC Deputy Secretaries can provide a quarterly 'Assurance Statement' to the Accounting Officer. These arrangements allow for reporting and escalation of issues through departmental structures to the Accounting Officer and will inform the content of the Department's Annual Governance Statement.

### 3rd Line of Defence

- 7.9 DfC's independent Internal Audit function forms the 3rd line of defence. Through a risk-based approach to its work, Internal Audit provides an objective evaluation of how effectively DfC assesses and manages risk, and how effectively the 1st and 2nd lines of defence operate in practice.

### External Assurance

- 7.10 Sitting outside DfC's own risk management framework and the 3 lines of defence are other sources of assurance that support DfC's understanding and assessment of its management of risk and operation of controls. The principal external source of assurance comes through the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO). The table below sets out the role of Internal Audit, External Audit and DARAC, and the standards against which they operate.

Departmental Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (DARAC)	Internal Audit (DfC & NICS Group)	External Audit – Northern Ireland Audit office (NIAO)
Operates in accordance with the ‘Audit Committee Handbook’.	Operates in accordance with the ‘Public Sector Internal Audit Standards’.	Operates in accordance with International Auditing Standards (UK and Ireland).
Provides independent review of the comprehensiveness and reliability of assurance on governance, risk management, control environment and the integrity of financial statements.	Provides an independent and objective opinion on risk management, control and governance. This is performed by measuring and evaluating the Department’s control environment, and its effectiveness in achieving the departmental objectives.	The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) provides an opinion on whether the Department’s financial statements give a true and fair view, in accordance with the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, of the Department’s affairs.
DARAC Chair reports (quarterly & annually) to the Board. This provides an assessment of assurances available on the effectiveness of risk management, control and governance across DfC.	An annual report and opinion is provided by the Head of Internal Audit, and is informed by the outcomes of risk based internal audits and consultancy/ advice and guidance reviews.	The C&AG also forms an opinion on whether DfC expenditure and income have been applied to the purposes intended by the Assembly.

## Reporting & Transparency

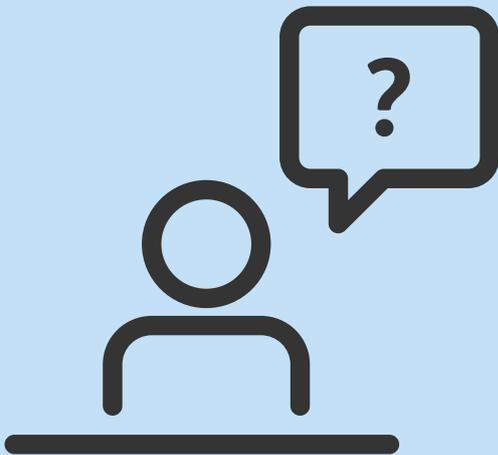
7.11 Public Sector entities need to demonstrate that they have delivered their stated commitments, requirements and priorities, and in doing so have used public resources effectively. To that end DfC reports publicly through its Annual Report and Accounts. Within the Annual Report and Accounts, the Department provides a Governance

Statement which explains the framework of governance and risk management operated within the Department. The DfC Accounting Officer is required to assess the effectiveness of the Department’s system of internal control and confirm that it has operated effectively throughout the year and will disclose this within the Governance Statement.

## 8. Making Decisions in the Public Interest

**As public servants we are all expected to uphold the core values of the Department and to operate in line with the principles of public life.....how can we best conduct ourselves to discharge these responsibilities?**

**The following Governance Arrangements and Guidance are in place to assist our people in making decisions in the public interest :**



and whistleblowing concerns. Staff can access the procedures through the Department's intranet site and members of the public can access procedures via the Department's website.

### **Fraud Policy**

[www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/fraud-policy-statement](http://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/fraud-policy-statement)

### **Fraud Response Plan**

[www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/fraud-response-plan](http://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/fraud-response-plan)

### **Raising Concerns (Whistleblowing) Policy and Procedures**

[nics.intranet.nigov.net/communities/documents/raising-concerns-whistleblowing-policy-and-procedures](http://nics.intranet.nigov.net/communities/documents/raising-concerns-whistleblowing-policy-and-procedures)

### **Report Benefit Fraud Online at:**

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/report-benefit-fraud-online> or contact the **Benefit Fraud Hotline: 0800 975 6050**

### **Fraud & Raising Concerns**

8.1 Departmental staff and members of the public can raise concerns quickly and in confidence, and through these procedures managers are made aware of how to handle both fraud referrals

### **Assurance Framework for DfC**

8.2 The Department's quarterly assurance process is an integral part of its governance arrangements. This provides evidence based assurance on the

management of risks and issues which threaten successful achievement of departmental objectives and effective public service delivery.

- 8.3 Quarterly 'Assurance Statements' are completed by Deputy Secretaries for their respective Groups. These are informed by completed Grade 7 to Grade 5 level 'Certificates of Assurance'.
- 8.4 The Department also operates an 'ALB Assurance Statement' process which informs and supports completion of the Deputy Secretary 'Assurance Statements'.

**Certificate of Assurance, and Assurance Statement Arrangements**

[nics.intranet.nigov.net/communities/documents/certificates-assurance-and-assurance-statements-guidance](https://nics.intranet.nigov.net/communities/documents/certificates-assurance-and-assurance-statements-guidance)

**Arrangements for Declarations of Interest**

- 8.5 The Department is committed to ensuring the highest possible standards of conduct in all that it does and has arrangements in place through which declarations of interest are identified and managed in order to maximise public confidence in the Department's delivery of public services. Each branch maintains a Register of Interests and the Register for the Departmental Management Board is published annually on the Department's website.

**Declarations of Interest Arrangements**

[nics.intranet.nigov.net/communities/documents/declaration-interest](https://nics.intranet.nigov.net/communities/documents/declaration-interest)

**DfC SCS Declarations of Interest Register**

[www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/departmental-management-board-register-interests](https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/departmental-management-board-register-interests)

## Arrangements for Acceptance & Provision of Gifts and Hospitality

- 8.6 As public servants we all have a responsibility to carry out, and be seen to carry out, our duties in a transparent and equitable manner. It is important therefore to recognise that accepting or providing a gift, hospitality or benefit could unwittingly compromise, or be seen to compromise, the integrity of both staff and the Department.
- 8.7 The Department publishes a register of gifts and hospitality offered to DfC Senior Civil Servants as outlined below:

### Gifts and Hospitality

[nics.intranet.nigov.net/communities/documents/gifts-and-hospitality](https://nics.intranet.nigov.net/communities/documents/gifts-and-hospitality)

### Gifts and Hospitality Departmental Board Register

Publication prior to 2020/21

<http://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/gifts-and-hospitality-register>

Publication from 2020/21 onwards  
<https://www.opendatani.gov.uk/dataset/dfc-senior-civil-servants-gifts-and-hospitality-register/resource/614d6306-fb37-45ae-b737-18d19dba6092>

## Delegated Authority and Approval Arrangements

- 8.8 Approval requirements (incorporating both Department of Finance and internal procedures) apply to DfC and its ALBs when conducting expenditure. Business areas are required to comply with the requirements of this guidance, and will liaise with their Finance Business Partners in the event of uncertainty.

### DfC Expenditure, Delegated Authority and Approval Arrangements.

[nics.intranet.nigov.net/communities/documents/delegated-authority-and-approval-arrangements](https://nics.intranet.nigov.net/communities/documents/delegated-authority-and-approval-arrangements)

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