



Department for
Communities

An Roinn

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Department fur

Commonities

www.communities-ni.gov.uk

DfC Business Plan

2024-25

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Foreword from the Minister

I am pleased to present my first Business Plan as Minister for Communities. My ambition is to deliver policies and programmes that will have real and meaningful impact, that are sustainable and that will provide tangible, lasting benefits. The Department for Communities provides many important services across our society and the key activities planned for the coming year are outlined in this Business Plan.

The past 12 months have been extremely challenging for both our citizens with the cost-of-living crisis, and for the Department, operating with a restricted budget while trying to deliver vital services which people rely on. Despite these challenges, the Department has continued to deliver high quality services and support for our citizens and communities. This Business Plan highlights a snapshot of the key achievements during 2023-24. Staff right across the Department should be proud of these achievements and I want to acknowledge their commitment to public service delivery.

In 2024-25, the Department will continue to operate within a constrained budget. My key priority is to deliver real, positive and lasting change for the people in Northern Ireland by focusing on programmes and policies that are transformative for people's lives and for our society. In taking difficult budget decisions, I have tried to shield core services as far as possible, while living within our budget. I recognise the challenges that this will bring and I remain committed to ensuring that the Department continues to provide support to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged people, families and communities across Northern Ireland.

The key activities that we are striving to deliver during 2024-25 are outlined at Annex

A of this Plan. The progress and success of these activities will be closely monitored throughout the year.

This Plan has been developed and published at a time when Executive colleagues and I are finalising a new Programme for Government (PfG) which will put in place actions and programmes across the whole of Government. The Department's Business Plan remains agile and will be reviewed and amended if necessary to support the priorities in the finalised PfG.

It is another busy year ahead for the Department and we will continue to work in partnership with Executive colleagues, other Departments, our Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs), other public sector organisations and the Voluntary and Community sector to deliver on the activities and targets in this Business Plan.

Gordon Lyons MLA

Minister for Communities



Introduction from the Permanent Secretary

The Department for Communities (DfC) has a track record of delivery. In recent years, it has been particularly challenging for the public sector to maintain delivery of quality services against a backdrop of resourcing pressures and a cost of living emergency.

The fact that DfC has continued to provide quality services to individuals, families and communities is a testament to the dedication of its people. Thank you to the staff of DfC, our ALBs and delivery partners for all they have done to sustain services and develop policy in the face of these challenges. I am proud to be part of a Department that consistently strives to meet the needs of those it serves.

The 2024-25 Business Plan sets out our ambition and goals, and how we will measure our performance, for the year ahead. The Business Plan has been refreshed to take account of the current delivery environment, the priorities of a new Minister, a new Departmental structure, and an evolving budgetary landscape. Delivering this Plan will require colleagues

across all Departmental business areas to work together with the commitment and determination that is a daily feature of the way we work. Our senior team remains committed to delivering on our strategic objectives, and a range of initiatives to support our people in the delivery of our Business Plan targets are outlined in this Plan.


While this year will again be challenging, particularly in the context of budget constraints, I have confidence that together we can deliver on the Minister's priorities through this 2024-25 Business Plan and continue to Support People, Build Communities and Shape Places.

Colum Boyle




Section 1 – Our Responsibilities


The Department delivers a wide range of services to the public – both directly and through its ALBs – which will support people, build communities and shape places. In supporting and advising the Minister, the Department’s main functions include:




delivery of social security, child maintenance and pensions



providing advice and support for those seeking employment and for those who are unable to work




ensuring the availability of good quality and affordable housing



encouraging diversity and participation in society and promoting social inclusion



promoting sports and leisure within our communities



supporting local government to deliver services



supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector



identifying and preserving records of historical, social and cultural importance to ensure they are available to the public and for future generations



realising the value of our historic environment

supporting creative industries, and promoting the arts, language and cultural sectors

providing free access to books, information, IT and community programmes through our libraries

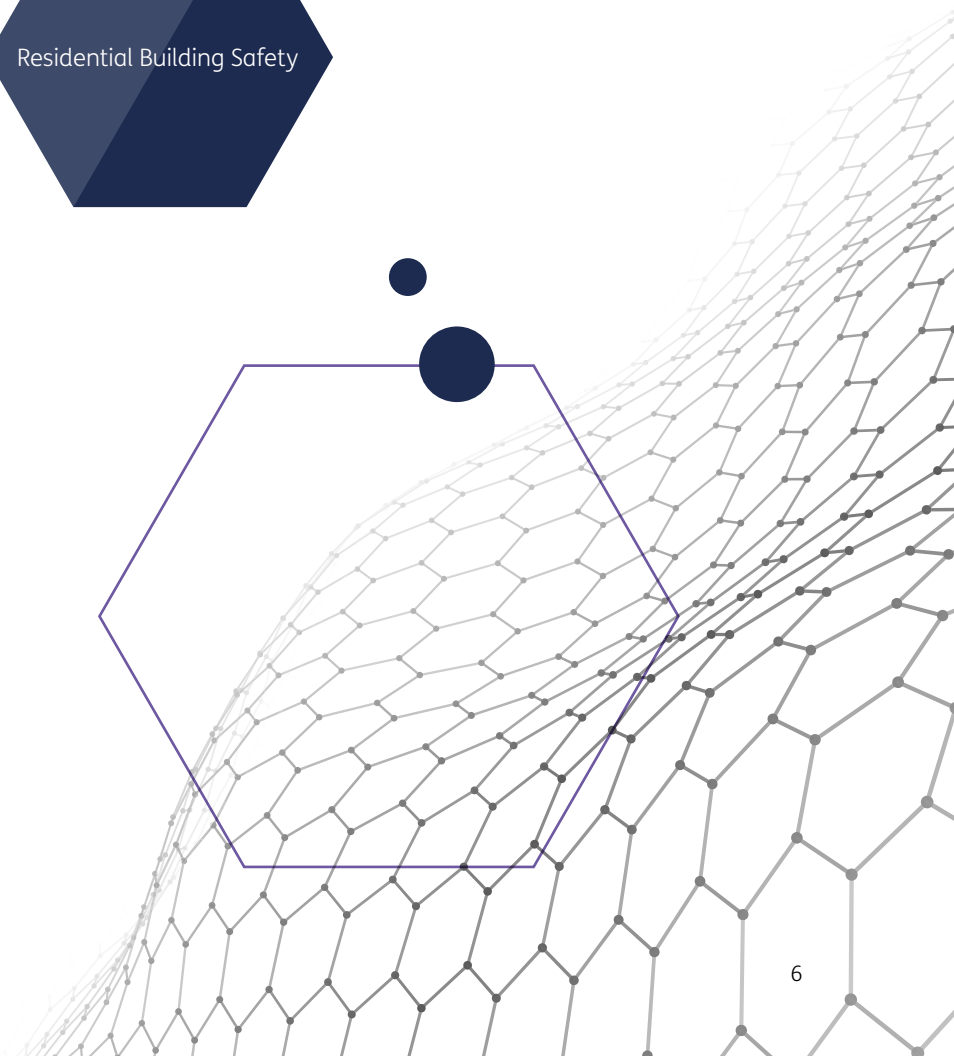
maintaining museums

revitalising town and city centres

The Appeals Service

Responding to Climate Change

Residential Building Safety



Section 2 – Key Achievements: 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024

The key achievements outlined in this section are a snapshot of the wide-ranging work taken forward by the Department during 2023-24. The achievements have been grouped by the Department’s strategic themes against which they were monitored and reported on during the 2023-24 business planning year. As outlined in Section 4 of this Plan, the Department has transitioned away from reporting by themes for the 2024-25 year and beyond, with a new strategic business planning framework in place.

Anti-Poverty



Introduced an Online Customer Portal through its Appeals Service (TAS), enabling citizens in this reporting year to lodge benefit appeals online



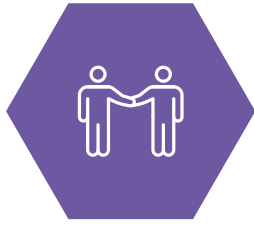
Provided funding of £2 million to support the rollout and enhancement of Social Supermarket models across all 11 local government areas, thus providing support to an estimated 2,500 of the most vulnerable households.



Helped approximately 12,000 people receive over £54.9 million in additional annualised benefits through the Make the Call service.



Processed over 72,000 Universal Credit claims. On average, 96% of new claims and 99% of existing claims, are paid in full and on time.



Supported over 800,000 people throughout Northern Ireland by administering Pension Service and Disability Benefit claims for around 544,140 individual customers, representing 28.5% (increase of 2.3% overall from the previous year) of the Northern Ireland population.

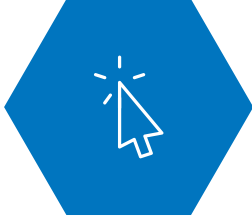


Processed approximately 4,000 Adviser Discretion Fund applications, paid out £1.4 million and supported 81% of the applicants into work.



Delivered a wide range of benefits through its Working Age Service to over 125,000 customers during 2023-24 to a value of over £800 million.

Agility & Innovation



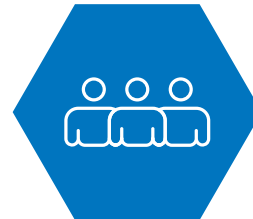
Delivered effective communications via Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Google, YouTube, and Spotify channels achieving 30 million impressions for digital campaigns to ensure we reach our target audiences.



Developed a unique data portal for Move to Universal Credit (UC) in Northern Ireland. The work on the dashboard was shortlisted for the 2024 Operational Delivery Profession Modern Civil Service Award.



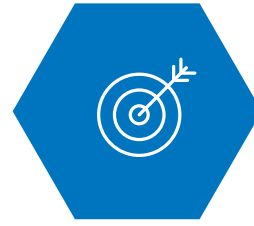
The Commercial Centre of Excellence has been established within the Department. Work is continuing on expanding the commercial service offering to contribute to the Department's high quality governance and assurance.



Delivered enhanced leadership capability and capacity to 524 of our staff via the Evolve Leadership programme. This year was the first year that all four tiers of the Evolve Leadership Development Programme have been delivered.



Launched a Cladding Safety Scheme to help residents of high-rise residential buildings in Northern Ireland receive funding to remediate cladding that has been assessed to be unsafe. Five buildings have applied to the scheme totalling 918 residential units.

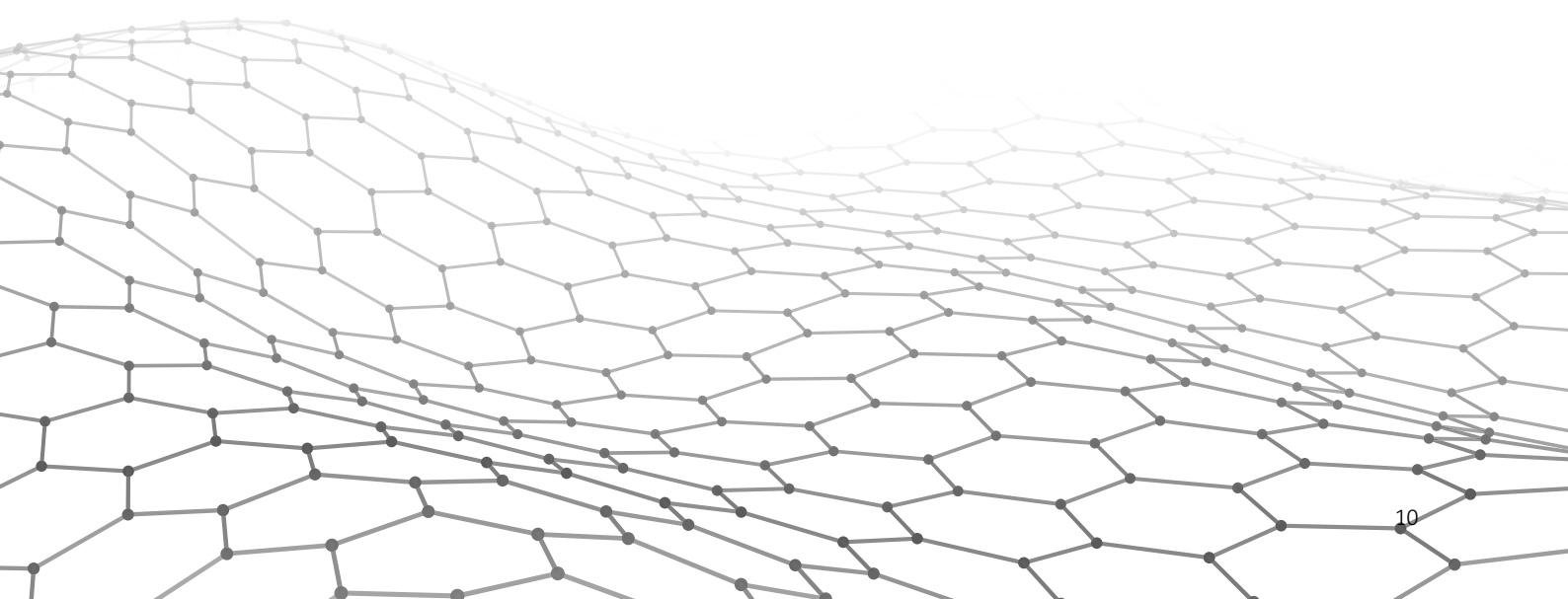


Held 347 employer events in Jobs & Benefits Offices, seven Cross Border Partnership Employment Service virtual job fairs, 7 large job fairs and 62 small job fairs in total which supported 12,278 people who attended to find work or get closer to work.

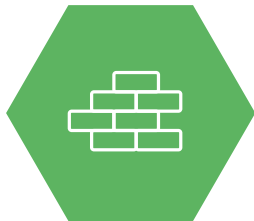


Achieved through the JobStart Scheme:

- 1,351 employer applications offering 3,737 JobStart opportunities.
- 944 young people participating in the Scheme.
- 64% of participants on a Specialist Pathway opportunity.



Sustainability & Inclusive Growth



Provided support to Queen's University Belfast, welcoming over 3,000 archaeologists from across the world to Belfast for the largest ever European Association of Archaeologists conference.



Contributed to the Executive's carbon reduction strategies by reducing the number of offices occupied in Belfast City Centre withdrawing from 4 buildings and maximising the use of Causeway Exchange and Castle Court by reallocating over 1,000 staff.



Invested £17.5 million in capital funding toward the regeneration of town and city centres through a wide range of works.



Collaborated with the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) to progress the delivery of 8 PEACE IV Shared Spaces projects to the value of £65 million and the design of two new PEACEPLUS Investment Areas worth £91 million.



In partnership with the Libraries NI and facilitated by the Department for Economy secured some £2.2 million of capital investment to progress a number of projects aimed at improving energy efficiency and reducing the carbon footprint of public library facilities.



Worked with NIHE to invest £159.5m in funding the Social Housing Development Programme in 2023/24. The main targets were achieved with 1,508 new social homes started against a target of 1,500 and 1,403 new social homes completed against a target of 1,400.

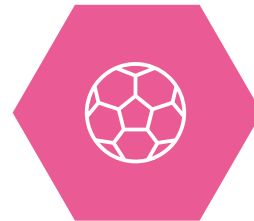


782 Co-Ownership intermediate homes delivered against an initial target of 700.

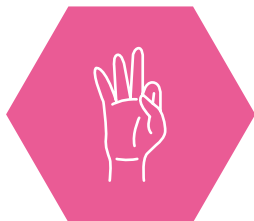
Wellbeing & Inclusion



Worked with Foyle Deaf Association – a Deaf-led Sign Language Teaching Centre in Derry/Londonderry, to develop, fund and launch an Interpreter Training programme to boost capacity by 6 British Sign Language (BSL) and 6 Irish Sign Language (ISL) interpreters by the end of 2024.



Funded a cohort of 10 performance football clubs to develop proposals to modernise their facilities, with awards of up to £30,000 each.



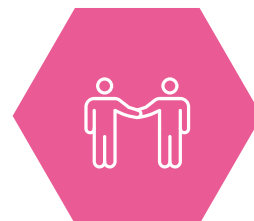
Supported Queens University Belfast in hosting an international Sign Language Conference on 21 and 22 March 2024 entitled 'The Fact of Deafness'.



Collected and arranged maintenance payments totalling £28.0 million, benefitting 21,570 children, through the Child Maintenance Service. This is a £2.7m increase across an additional 6% of supported children benefitting on last year.



Hosted Celebration of Sport Events in Ballymoney and Craigavon. Over the course of the 2 days approximately 1,300 children had the opportunity to participate in taster sessions for over 40 sports.



Supported Work Coaches in their roles delivering claimant base training to 621 staff on supporting customers with Learning Disabilities and 602 staff in Supporting Customers affected by Domestic Abuse.



Trained 103 staff as Mental Health First Aiders with a further 91 staff volunteering as Well Champions.

Section 3 – People, Resources and Governance

3.1 People

As at 31 March 2024 the Department employed 9,559 FTE staff.

This is made up of 6,560 FTE permanent staff and 2,999 FTE Agency staff.

- Communities, Place and Local Government Group: **355**
- Corporate Services Group: **421 (Agency 3)**
- Engaged Communities Group: **260 (Agency 81)**
- Housing & Sustainability Group: **140 (Agency 20)**
- Operational Delivery Group: **2,649 (Agency 2,430)**
- Work & Health Group: **2,735 (Agency 465)**

Our People Action Plan

In the year ahead we remain committed to our strategic people objectives to work together, build our leadership and management capability and foster an inclusive environment where all our people are valued and can thrive. This will be achieved through:

Capacity and capability

- Progression and application of a DfC Workforce Plan provides a detailed understanding of our staff resourcing model;
 - a pre-emptive and informed resourcing plan;
 - a learning needs analysis;
 - succession planning and talent management; and
 - an informed and responsive Learning & Development Strategy/ Action Plan with learning pathways for specific roles across DfC including formal and informal learning with an emphasis on personal responsibility.
- Mainstreaming and refinement of the Operational Delivery Apprenticeship Scheme (ODAS) and possible linkages with JobStart.
- More direct/in person engagement with managers and staff to showcase available resources, understand more about needs, and ensure knowledge to do the job.

Leadership

- Leverage of additional leadership offerings based on staff feedback and enhancement of the learning from the Evolve Leadership programme.
- Implementation of the Hybrid Review recommendations to support greater collaboration, engagement, inclusion, knowledge transfer, communication, connection with business purpose/values, and both personal and organisational growth.

Wellbeing

- An in-house pilot adaption of the Condition Management Programme that supports people to stay in work and/or return to work after a period of illness.
- Further development of DfC's Recognition Programme to ensure a culture of acknowledgement and appreciation.
- Promotion of 'you said, we listened, together we did' to reinforce linkages between the People Survey and People Action Plan and demonstrate how people's views are informing the decisions that affect them.
- Using insight from our Health & Wellbeing Assessment, develop the role of leaders in setting example and providing space for well-being as an integral element of people leadership.
- Encourage and recognise innovation.

3.2 Resourcing

2024-25 Budget

The 2024-25 budget was agreed by the Executive on 25 April 2024. The Executive's Budget 2024-25 settlement provides the Department with £856.0m Resource DEL, £133.4m Capital DEL and £29.8m Financial Transactions Capital.

DfC and its funded ALBs face significant funding challenges in delivering a balanced budget in 2024-25. Pressures arising from a constrained budget are compounded by recent high levels of inflation, which have added to the cost of delivering public services, along with further increased demand for public services.

- With regards Non-Ring-Fenced Resource, the Department submitted £128.8m of bids and was provided with a General Allocation of £13.0m. This resulted in the Department facing a £115.8m or (-17%) shortfall in Non-Ring-Fenced Resource.

Given the very challenging budget position, the Minister firstly considered internal reductions and cuts on the Department's own functions to protect others, prior to the need to consider the Department's funded ALBs and 3rd party organisations, including the Voluntary and Community sector.

- On Capital, the Department received a net allocation of £133.4m. At the beginning of the financial year the Net Capital allocation resulted in a £167.3m (-48.5%) shortfall against Capital bids submitted for 2024-25. Considering the extremely challenging Capital position, after inescapable requirements are met, taking proactive measures to manage the position, in tandem with managing a £10m overplanning position, only £22m of funding is available for Other High Priority Capital Projects.

Budget 2024-25 - Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)

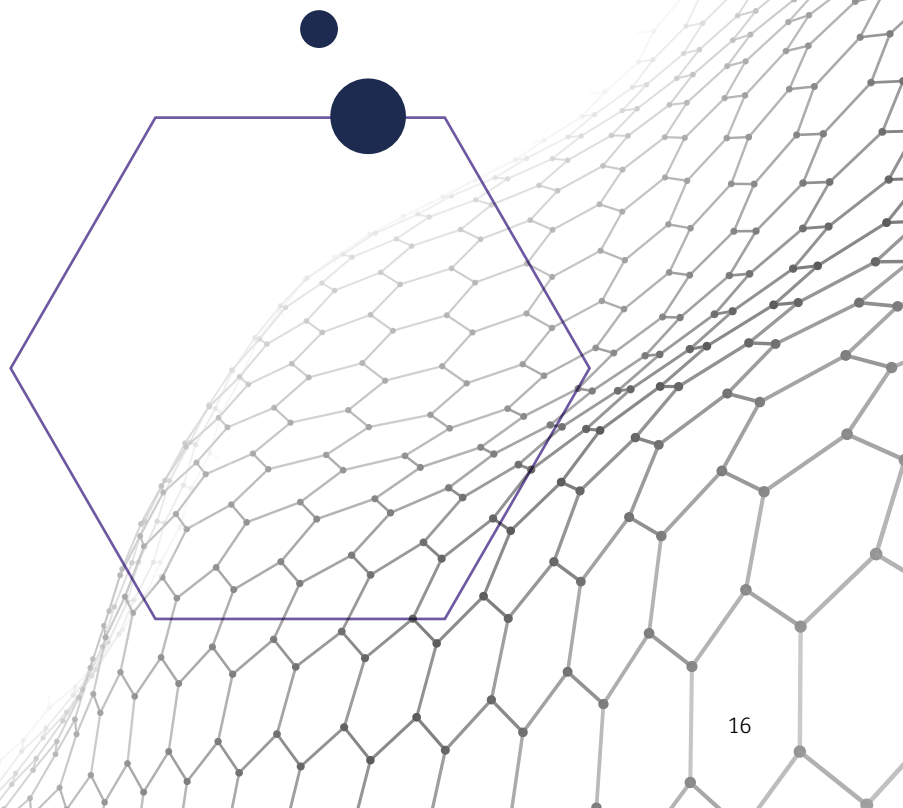
Given the magnitude of the Resource and Capital DEL shortfalls facing the Department in 2024-25 and the potential adverse impact this will have on people in Section 75 categories, an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on the Department's 2024-25 Budget is necessary. Following the Minister for Communities' announcement on the initial Budget 2024-25 allocations, the Department

launched its Budget 2024-25 EQIA on 11 June 2024 which will run for a 12-week period, closing on 3 September 2024. The Department's final decision report is expected to be available in late October 2024. The Department's EQIA presents Minister's initial decisions to live within his Department's 2024-25 Budget allocations and the potential impact to people in Section 75 categories of those decisions on the services and supports the Department provides.

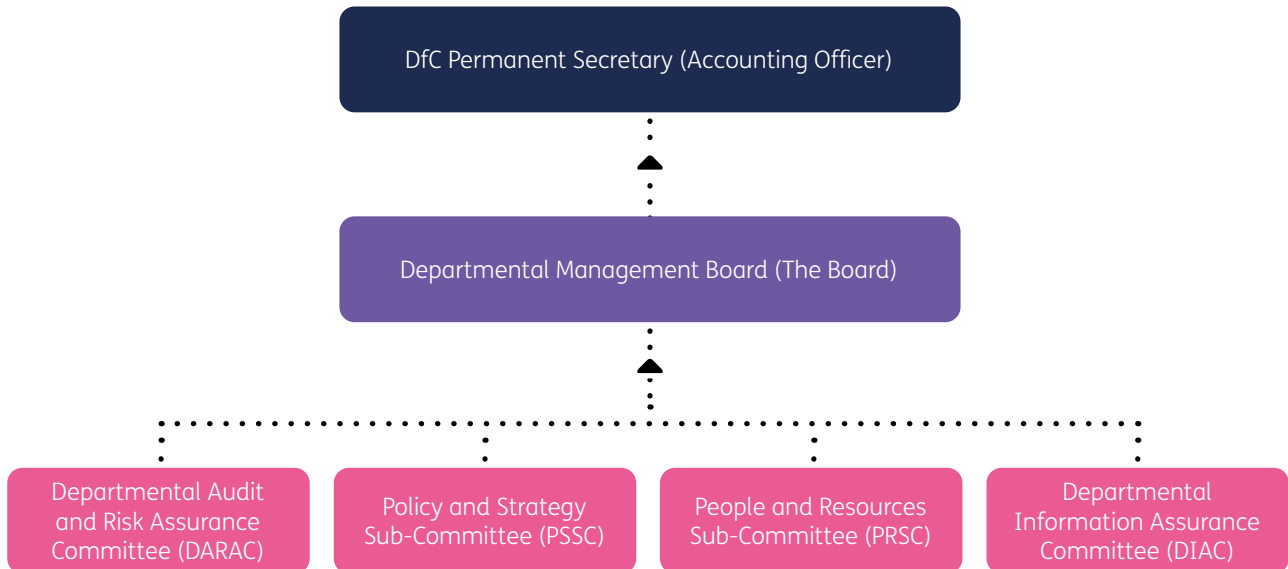
3.3 Governance

The functions of DfC are exercised at all times subject to the direction and control of the Minister (The Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (NI) 2016). The Permanent Secretary as administrative head of the Department is responsible for strategic direction and advice to the Minister on Departmental policy making and implementation activities.

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.



DfC Board and Committee structure



The Accounting Officer is assisted by a Departmental Management Board (DMB) which meets on a regular basis.

The key aspects of the Board’s role include:

- Setting strategic direction to achieve Ministerial objectives and NICS Work Programme commitments;
- Agreeing and promoting the Department’s vision and values;
- Financial planning and management, including allocation of resources to match delivery requirements and in-year monitoring and management of expenditure;
- Monitoring departmental performance against objectives and targets and assessing the risks to delivery;
- Monitoring overall financial position of the Department;
- Monitoring progress against PfG commitments (once established);
- Risk management policies, registers, and the risk appetite of the Department;
- Finance, human resources and IT strategies affecting long term capability of the Department;
- Budget allocation;
- Corporate governance arrangements within the Department and its ALBs; and
- Scrutiny of performance of sponsored bodies through established sponsor arrangements.

The Department is organised into a new six Group structure, with effect from 1 January 2024. Each Group is responsible for policy and service delivery for its areas of business. Individual Groups are led by a Deputy Secretary each of whom reports to the DfC Permanent Secretary.

The Department's Corporate Governance Framework specifies the organisation's governance structures and the roles and responsibilities of those charged with governance. This framework provides an overview of the Department's approach to risk management, its system of internal controls and the governance and assurance arrangements which have been established to safeguard against risks which threaten the successful achievement of departmental objectives and effective public service delivery.

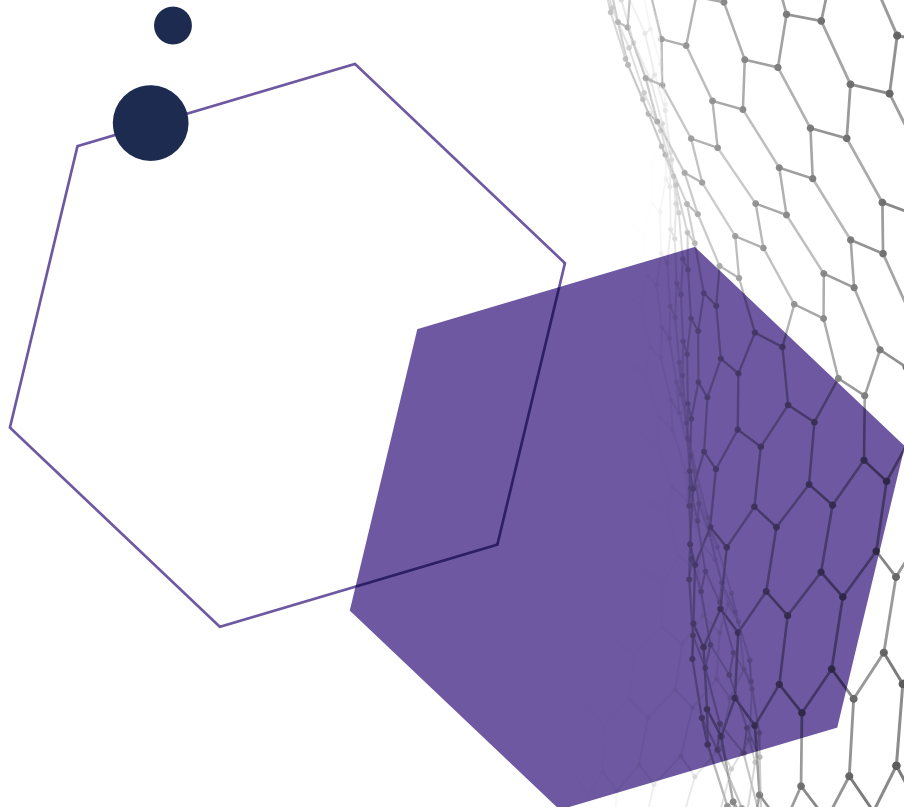
Governance arrangements include regular monitoring of the Departmental Business Plan, risk management and assurance reporting, stringent financial management and control procedures, communication of Governance policies and arrangements, anti-fraud policies, raising concerns procedures and publication of the Department's Annual Report and Accounts.

DMB is supported in its role by a Departmental Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (DARAC). Its role is to support the Board on issues of risk, control and governance across the Department. It does so by reviewing the comprehensiveness of assurances in meeting the Board and Accounting Officer's assurance needs and reviewing the reliability and integrity of these assurances.

DMB is supported in its role by three further Sub-Committees: The Policy and Strategy Sub-Committee (PSSC) ensures that the Department has a cohesive policy and legislation agenda, provides policy leadership and ensures the Department is equipped to fulfil its policy responsibilities. The Committee will provide assurance to the Accounting Officer and assist DMB in relation to performance against the DfC strategic objectives (as outlined in the DfC Strategic Business Planning Framework) and business planning activities. The Committee oversees the Department's delivery against PfG, and Ministerial commitments, the operational management of their implementation via the DfC Business Plan, and the ongoing development of the Department's policy making capacity.

DMB's People & Resources Sub-Committee (PRSC) provides assurance to the Accounting Officer and assists DMB by overseeing strategic resource planning in relation to the Department's staff headcount from a financial, HR, capability, staff engagement, accommodation and IT enabled perspective. PRSC ensures the Department has the right people, at the right time with the right skills and talent to deliver on the Department's strategic objectives. The sub-committee also observes and responds to changes in operating context that might impact on the Department's ability to achieve sustainable performance.

The Departmental Information Assurance Committee (DIAC) is a Committee of the Board whose role is to ensure that the Department has appropriate policies, management and governance systems to effectively protect the considerable volume of information held by the Department. DIAC is chaired by the Senior Information Risk Owner and assists the Board and Accounting Officer with responsibilities relating to the use, processing, storage, sharing and transmission of information or data and the systems and processes used for those purposes.



Section 4 – Our Strategic Objectives and Activities for 2024-2025

In February 2024, the Department’s Top Leadership Team agreed to transition away from the Department’s five-year Strategy and revert to an annual Business Planning model, supported by an agreed set of strategic objectives spanning more than one financial year. This new approach will be governed by a Strategic Business Planning Framework which sets out the Department’s strategic objectives, the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders, and the monitoring and reporting of strategic objectives and activities.

This Business Plan sets out our key activities and milestones to deliver against the strategic objectives until 31 March 2025. The key activities and supporting milestones for 2024-25 are outlined in Annex A of this Plan. These activities and milestones have significant interdependencies to delivering on the objectives which will help support people, build communities and shape places.

The following are the strategic objectives for the Department for 2024-25:

- Deliver social security, employment support, child maintenance and pensions to ensure everyone has access to the right (financial) support when they need it.
- Promote residential building safety and the availability of good quality and affordable housing to offer individuals and families shelter and a place to feel safe.
- Recognise diversity, tackle poverty, encourage participation in society and promote social inclusion to create a society of respect and acceptance.
- Engage with and support, through improved collaboration, central and local Government and the Voluntary & Community sector to build more empowered, confident communities and reduce disadvantage.
- Identify, protect, conserve, promote and provide access to our historic environment and records of historical, social and cultural importance to inform and encourage understanding of how our rich and diverse cultural heritage shapes us now and in the future.

- Support our creative industries and arts sector, promote our language and cultural sectors, and foster knowledge including within our libraries and museums, to break down barriers, connect people and communities, shape our places and deliver economic and social value.
- Provide strategic direction for our sports and physical activity sectors to encourage increased and diverse participation and high quality facilities, delivering an active, healthy, resilient and inclusive society which recognises and values both participation and excellence.
- Transform our towns and cities into safe, accessible and sustainable centres through growth in homes, retail, business and leisure; thereby creating places where people want to live, work and invest.
- To support a just transition to a more sustainable Northern Ireland, ensure all policies and functions of the Department reflect the statutory duties set out in the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act 2022.
- Deliver effective governance, financial and people arrangements to support effective service delivery across the Department.

While the Departmental Plan includes some of the Department's key activities for 2024-25, further activity including business as usual is reported at Group and Directorate level.

The Business Plan for 2024-25 has been developed at the same time as the Executive is developing a new PfG. The Department's Business Plan 2024-25 will support the finalised PfG, and once the PfG is published, this Business Plan will be reviewed accordingly.

Monitoring & Reporting

The Department will monitor progress on the activities contained within the Business Plan at quarterly intervals throughout the year. A progress report will be presented to PSSC for review and consideration, with assurance and areas of concern escalated to DMB. Progress of the longer term strategic objectives (outlined above) will be reported at year end (31 March 2025) using an aggregate of the Red Amber Green (RAG) ratings of the activities that support each objective.

Delivery Partners

Our ALBs, Councils and other Executive Departments perform many vital and significant functions, and it is through the strategic alignment of objectives and working with these strategic partners that the Department will deliver much of its work. DfC ALBs, Statutory Advisory Bodies and Independent Statutory Office Holders are outlined below:

Arm's Length Bodies

Armagh Observatory & Planetarium
Arts Council for Northern Ireland
Charity Commission for Northern Ireland
Commissioner for Older People Northern Ireland
Libraries Northern Ireland
Local Government Staff Commission for Northern Ireland
National Museums Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children & Young People
Northern Ireland Housing Executive
Northern Ireland Local Government Officers Superannuation Committee
Northern Ireland Museums Council
North South Language Body – Ulster Scots Agency
North South Language Body – Foras Na Gaeilge
Sport NI
Ulster Supported Employment Limited

Advisory Committees

Charity Advisory Committee
Historic Buildings Council
Historic Monuments Council.
Ministerial Advisory Group for Architecture and the Built Environment

Other

The Discretionary Support Commissioner
Vaughan's Charitable Trust

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