



Governance, Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (GARAC)

Date 29 January 2026

Time 9.30 am

Location: Board Room

Attendance	
Chair:	Philip Graham
Attendees:	Dale Ashford (Non-Executive Director) Paul Corrigan (Non-Executive Director)
In Attendance:	Catherine McKeown (Internal Audit, BSO) Tomas Wilkinson, (NIAO) Corey Parr (NIAO) Neil Sinclair (Interim Director of Ops and Chief Paramedic Officer) Nigel Ruddell (Medical Director) Seamus Mullen (Interim Director of PPCS) Leahann Donnelly (Interim Director of Finance) Brona McAuley (Assistant Director of Finance) Nick Henry (Assistant Director of Governance) Michael Riddell (Assistant Director of HR & OD) Michelle Lemon (Director of HR & OD) Maxine Paterson (Interim Chief Executive) Stacey Beggs (Temporary Board Secretary) Christine Hagan (ASM)
Apologies:	

Minutes of Meeting		
Agenda Item	Summary of the discussion	Actions Agreed
1.	<u>Apologies & Remarks</u> The Committee NOTED there were no apologies received.	
2.	<u>Declaration of Potential Conflict of Interest & Confirmation of Quorum</u> No declarations of interest were made and the Chair confirmed that the Committee was quorate. The Chair confirmed and emphasised the confidentiality of information.	
3.	<u>Minutes of the previous meeting held on Tuesday 9 December 2025</u>	



	<p>The minutes of the previous meeting on 9 December 2025 were APPROVED on a proposal from Mr Ashford and seconded by Mr Corrigan.</p>	
<p>4.</p>	<p><u>Matters Arising</u></p> <p><u>Action 1 – Item 4</u> Mr Mullen confirmed that the Fleet DAC was seeking approval retrospectively as it was completed in 2023 and then mislaid.</p> <p><u>Action 2 - Item 5</u> Ms Donnelly updated the Committee on progress regarding the regional policy on business case procedures and that SPPG are keen to close this off. Last year NIAS implemented internal business case procedures which are aligned with other Trusts to ensure governance within NIAS. Ms Donnelly suggested that she discusses this further with Internal Audit as NIAS have no power to progress this on their own. Ms McKeown welcomed a further discussion but pointed out that the outcome will require a regional consensus.</p> <p>Ms Paterson confirmed that she had escalated the matter to the Chief Executives Forum and Directors of Finance have been asked to take forward in the most pragmatic way as possible.</p> <p><u>Action 3 - Item 5</u> HR Recommendation 1.10 - Ms Lemon advised there is an update regarding unsocial hours on the agenda today.</p> <p><u>Action 4 – Item 5</u> HR Recommendation 243 – Ms Lemon agreed to encourage progress.</p> <p><u>Action 5 – Item 5</u> Ops Recommendation 219 - Mr Sinclair agreed to provide the necessary evidence and assurance that progress is being monitored, however this hasn't been completed due to operational pressures and agreed to ensure it is prioritised.</p> <p><u>Action 6 – Item 5</u> Compliance Mandatory Training – Ms Lemon advised that there will be an update at the February PCOD meeting and the Chair emphasised the importance of planning training correctly for the next three years as</p>	<p>Ms Lemon</p> <p>Mr Sinclair</p>

	<p>there is some complications with data and differences in figures, and he requested for this information to be confirmed and advised to the Committee.</p>	<p>Ms Lemon</p>
5.	<p><u>Chair's Business</u></p> <p><u>Terms of Reference (ToR) Review</u> The Committee AGREED the revised ToR on a proposal from Mr Ashford and seconded by Mr Corrigan and the Chair suggested that members consider agreeing matters and closing off activity outside of meetings via email, if appropriate, to utilise time at meetings better.</p> <p><u>25/26 Forward Work Plan and 26/27 Forward Work Plan and Dates</u> The Committee NOTED the schedules provided and the Chair emphasised that they are flexible and can be changed at any time.</p> <p><u>Review of Standing Orders</u></p> <p>The Committee AGREED the revised standing orders.</p>	<p>All</p>
6.	<p><u>Standing Items</u></p> <p><u>NIAS Direct Award Contract Register</u> The Committee NOTED the DAC report and the Chair advised that he is circulating an email to Senior managers regarding his dissatisfaction about DACs being approved retrospectively, and Ms Donnelly confirmed this will be brought to the attention of Directors and ADs.</p> <p>Ms Donnelly referred to the item regarding suction units which she has referred to BSO to understand why it is categorised red and will provide an update to the Committee via email, in advance of the next meeting.</p> <p>The Committee noted concern regarding the Vodafone service and usage retrospective DAC as they were reducing but now appear to be increasing.</p> <p><u>Fraud Update</u></p> <p>The Committee NOTED the Fraud Update and that there have been two new allegations of fraud since the last meeting and three cases have closed since the last meeting.</p>	<p>Ms Donnelly</p>



	<p>Mr Corrigan highlighted there are a number of cases relating to staff allegedly working whilst off sick and queried how this is being addressed. Mr Riddell confirmed that recurring reminders are being sent to staff to ensure they update NIAS on secondary employments.</p>	
7.	<p><u>Internal Audit</u></p> <p><u>To advise on key issues</u></p> <p><u>Progress Report</u> The Committee NOTED the Update Report provided by Internal Audit and Ms McKeown pointed out the salient points.</p> <p>The driver training/mandatory training audit was finalised with management yesterday and will come to the March Committee and the financial review is on schedule and will follow.</p> <p>Internal Audit have discussed the upcoming three-year plan with Directors and have arranged to discuss it with the Committee Chair next week.</p> <p>Mr Corrigan referred to the driver training/mandatory training report being issued to management on 10 November 2025 and that GARAC had not yet had the opportunity to review it. Ms Paterson confirmed that some challenges were surfaced in terms of the recommendations and she undertook to understand the them in more detail and met with IA and reached an agreement. The matter was escalated to the Chief Executive and there has been some learning from communications this week with the parties involved.</p> <p>Ms Lemon elaborated that the recommendations were complex and cross directorate and part of the challenges and delays were due to winter pressures, however it has been resolved and some learning achieved.</p> <p>The Committee Chair reiterated his concern regarding the way the draft report was handled and escalated. It was discussed at the GARAC pre meeting and the Chair commended Ms McAuley on resolving the matter and acknowledged there was learning.</p>	
8.	<u>External Audit</u>	

To advise on key issues

NIAS Audit Strategy 2025-26

Members welcomed Mr Tomas Wilkinson, Director of the NI Audit Office and the Committee **NOTED** the Audit Strategy 25-26 for NIAS' Public Funds and Charitable Trust Funds, and that there is a regional risk introduced for all Trusts this year regarding the risk to break even.

Management control is an important consideration for auditors which they have kept as a significant risk due to limited assurances, however, they accept NIAS are operating in a demanding and competing environment and will continue to monitor.

Ms Paterson confirmed for the Committee that NIAS' risk to the break-even position was surfaced internally with Committees and they have been working closely with SPPG and have a pathway to reach breakeven which will require refinement to operational planning. Ms Donnelly added that this has been the main focus for the Finance Directorate in recent weeks and there are risks and unprecedented operational issues, however, they will endeavour to manage and mitigate risks.

Mr Corrigan referred to the statutory duty to break even as a significant risk, which is nothing new for all trusts and in recent years some trusts were forecasting not breaking.

Ms Hagan confirmed that it will come down to the review and regularity of opinion and how the significant risks will be viewed, however, they appreciate the pay award is out of NIAS' control. NIAS had signalled a risk to not achieving break-even operationally and the impact and reason for this significant risk is the opinion of audit.

The Committee Chair noted the potential risks to all HSC Trusts in respect of the systemic financial pressures.

Mr Wilkinson confirmed that if/when the audit report is written alongside any qualification it will draw a distinction between operational and pay award pressure.

Ms Paterson confirmed that Trusts have received draft planning guidance with scenarios and expects Audit will get access to them in due course.



<p>9.</p>	<p><u>Risk Management Policy / Risk Appetite Review</u></p> <p>The Committee APPROVED the Risk Management Policy and risk appetite statement on a proposal from Mr Ashford and seconded by Mr Corrigan.</p> <p>Mr Corrigan sought clarification on staff compliance in relation to the e learning package and Mr Henry confirmed NIAS have committed to present this as an annual KPI to GARAC for compliance.</p>	
<p>10.</p>	<p><u>Corporate Risk Register</u></p> <p>The Committee NOTED the updates to the Corporate Risk Register.</p> <p>Ms Lemon referred to absence management and that NIAS are assessing the current position against previous positions of escalation and more detail will be presented to the PCOD Committee.</p> <p>Mr Corrigan conveyed his concern with the increase in absence which is continuing in an upward trajectory. He is content for SLT to review and the PCOD Committee to monitor.</p> <p>Mr Ashford pointed out that contract management has been de escalated however the Committee have reviewed six DACs retrospectively, which doesn't demonstrate assurances are in place.</p> <p>Mr Henry explained that the DAC reported via GARAC is in place and each team have a risk register and are aware of contracts and managing deadlines. The second line of assurance is via directorate accountability meetings and the risk on IA was reducing risk via contract management. There are still issues which will be managed at directorate level, similar to sick absence, but there are mechanisms in place to manage same.</p> <p>Mr Ashford queried what the trigger is to de-escalate risks and suggested selective directorate risks are presented to the next GARAC meeting so they have oversight at management level.</p> <p>Ms Donnelly agreed with Mr Henry that NIAS have made good progress in relation to contract management, but are mindful that the number of</p>	



retrospective DACs is still an issue. The Committee Chair requested keeping this on the register for one more term to see if it has an impact on retrospective DACS.

Ms Paterson accepted the opinion regarding contract management and reminded the Committee of the significant improvements from previous DAC registers .

Mr Mullen advised that the status of the new risk added in relation to HART premises has improved.

Ms Paterson advised that EQUIP has been escalated regionally on CRR's as it is considered the biggest system change within the public sector currently which Trusts are managing alongside many other challenges. The SRO, Karen Bailey, presented a blueprint for full implementation by November 2026 with internal assurance for Organisations and acknowledgement that protection of capacity within HR and Finance teams to implement will be required. Chief Executives have asked the programme team to come along to Trusts to give some assurance about the implementation.


Ms Lemon welcomes the concerns raised at the Chief Executive Meetings and highlighted that there are also concerns regarding the design and build of the system and that more detail will be discussed at the PCOD meeting.

The Committee Chair highlighted that any major redesign or change of critical information systems is a huge risk and needs to be on the CRR and that sector wide is good as a collective risk.

Mr Mullen referred to the Fleagh Festival which was raised at the PEQS Committee due to the number of risks regarding insufficient planning, led by the city council and other stakeholders. These concerns have been flagged with the event organiser and SPPG and a meeting has been set up with Ms McWilliams, Lead for emergency planning, to escalate the risk appropriately. There are also ongoing discussions regarding the commissioning capacity and additional resource required which isn't funded for. Ms Donnelly is exploring this further with colleagues from other ambulance services and blue light services to try and seek full cost recovery.



	<p>Mr Sinclair has arranged a meeting with Dr Graham, Mr Ashford and Mr Quinn to understand the risks regarding the limited operations response capability for SORT (Specialist Operational Resource Team), and members confirmed they are content to escalate the risk.</p> <p>There has been good progress made in discussions with TUs regarding the Policy for TOIL and Mr Riddell confirmed that the legacy TOIL will be resolved by July which has been factored in to finance plans. The Committee were reassured that the PCOD Committee will receive regular reports on balances which is another control.</p> <p>NIAS now have controls in place to manage annual leave against the GRS system and have issued messaging to line managers to encourage staff to use their leave balance.</p>	
11.	<p><u>Update on Unsocial Hours – IA Progress</u></p> <p>The Committee NOTED the report provided by Mr Riddell and that the key change is a proposal for a mandate to TUs about concerns raised from IA to be addressed, which has been approved by SLT.</p> <p>There is still work to be concluded that may not be closed off this year however, IA continue to monitor the progress, which may be built into the flexibility of next year’s plan.</p>	
12.	<p><u>Any Other Business</u> No matters discussed</p>	
13.	<p><u>Closed Meeting</u> No closed meeting took place.</p>	
14.	<p><u>Date of Next Meeting</u> 17 February 2026 (MS Teams) - Focus on Internal Audit recommendations 12 March 2026</p>	

SIGNED: 

DATE: 12/3/26