Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Minutes of One Hundred and Sixty Eighth Trust Board Meeting held on Thursday 27th November 2025 at 11:00am, Lecture Theatre, Multidisciplinary Education Centre, Causeway Hospital, Coleraine

Present:

Anne O'Reilly, Chair
Suzanne Pullins, Chief Executive
Carol Diffin, Non-Executive Director, Vice Chair
Kathy Mackenzie, Non-Executive Director
Paul Turley, Non-Executive Director
Paul Douglas, Non-Executive Director
Dr Janet Gray, Non-Executive Director
George Platt, Non-Executive Director
Scott Armstrong, Non-Executive Director
Dr George Gardiner, Executive Director of Medicine
Maura Dargan, Executive Director of Social Work
Gill Murphy, Executive Director of Nursing
Gillian Traub, Director of Operations
Jacqui Reid, Director of Human Resources, Organisational Development and Corporate Communications
Neil Martin, Director of Strategic Planning, Performance and ICT
Stevie Lennon, Interim Director of Finance
Dr Petra Corr, Director of Mental Health, Learning Disability and Community Wellbeing
Paddy Graffin, Director of Infrastructure
Diane Spence, Director of Community Care
Audrey Harris, Director of Medicine and Emergency Medicine
Lynne McCartney, Director of Surgical and Clinical Services
Jacqui Armstrong, Director of Integrated Care
Joanne Edgar, Head of Communications
Francis Rice, Independent Advisor to Trust Board
Karen O'Kane, Business Support Manager

In attendance:

Caroline Diamond, Assistant Director, Women's Services and Head of Midwifery
Shama Lamsiah, Service User

TB122/25 Apologies

Apologies were received from Owen Harkin, Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Finance.

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TB123/25 Conflicts of Interest

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

TB124/25 Chair's Report

The Chair welcomed Dr Gardiner, Executive Director of Medicine, and Mrs Armstrong, Director of Integrated Care, to their first Trust Board meeting.

TB125/25 Chief Executive Report

Mrs Pullins began her update by welcoming Mrs Armstrong, whose interim appointment is the next step in the Trust's work to deal with the unsustainable pressures on Unscheduled Care Services and delayed discharges.

The Chief Executive also updated Trust Board on her recent attendance at Health Committee to give an oral briefing on Violence and Aggression towards staff. Mrs Edgar and Mrs Pullins are examining what the Trust can do, especially for those who act out of frustration.

Mrs Pullins congratulated the Neonatal Unit on their receipt of the Bliss Charter Gold Award, which was presented to the team on 26th November. This is a national award and showcases how well the team works with its partners, including Tiny Life.

TB126/25 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as an accurate record, subject to a small amendment.

TB127/25 Matters Arising

There were no matters arising, not already on the agenda.

TB128/25 Update from People and Culture Committee

Mr Turley reported that the People and Culture Committee met on 11th November 2025 and he informed Trust Board that the committee received a presentation on the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) Being Human Report, which included a number of domains which sit well with the Trust's values and objectives. The work was carried out in early 2025, with a report launched in September 2025 and moving towards full implementation by April 2026. There will be an eLearning package made available for staff. There has been buy-in from other Arm's Length Bodies (ALB) and partner organisations and it will be kept under review by the Patient and Client Council (PCC). Mr Turley also added that work continued on the fake references issue.

There were a number of items for escalation to Trust Board and these were included in the report. Mr Turley confirmed that assurances were provided and positive solutions were being developed. The Chair pointed out that the use of the Briefing Paper coversheet was critical in helping members to understand the issues and the clear assurance statements were welcome. Mrs Reid responded that the completion of the report was a team effort. Mrs Reid also noted that work would continue on enhancing vaccination uptake and said that absence continued to be a worry; further work was required. The Chair welcomed the use of charitable trust funds to support staff and Mrs Pullins advised that the funding given by Mr Robin Swann when he was Health Minister was now coming to an end and the Chair said that the committee could consider the use of other charitable funds.

TB129/25 Update from Northern Partnership and Population Health Committee

Ms O'Reilly, speaking to the update from Northern Partnership and Population Health Committee, felt it was making an impact and a difference with partnership working. The Chair mentioned, for example, the community appointment days which were very welcome, especially the early dementia service. The Chair particularly welcomed the willingness of staff to look for alternative ways of working. There is a proposal to potentially scale up Musculoskeletal clinics and Jill Bradley, Assistant Director, Allied Health Professionals (AHP) is working with community and voluntary partners in regard to services for

Children with Disabilities. The Chair referred members to updates in the Briefing Paper and concluded that there was growing evidence of the impact of the committee which fits well with the Reset Plan and Neighbourhood planning.

TB130/25 Service User Experience: Paediatrics and Women's Services

Ms O'Reilly welcomed Caroline Diamond and Sharma Lamsiah to Trust Board. Mrs Diamond provided members with a presentation on feedback from service users, which was carried out as part of the journey of the Transformation of Acute Maternity Services. Mrs Diamond noted that feedback from and the concerns of service users had been listened to and outlined the additional space and pathways created to help manage the move to Antrim. Trust Board were also informed that the ongoing work to develop an Alongside Midwifery Led Unit (AMLU) would help to de-medicalise births and provide additional space for elective Caesarean Sections. With regard to overall feedback from July 2023, Mrs Diamond advised that there were 78 positive stories on the Care Opinion platform, out of a total of 115, and 110 complaints and 164 compliments during the same period. Sharma Lamsiah then read out the email she had sent to the Trust outlining her experience having given birth to her first child in Causeway and delivering the second in Antrim. Sharma reflected that the Antrim Unit had been busy but the care and work of the staff was excellent. The Chair welcomed Sharma's feedback and said it mattered greatly to Trust Board to hear directly and she was delighted to hear Sharma's view of the service. Mr Armstrong and Mr Turley had recently visited the Antrim Unit and echoed the comments made, and congratulated Mrs Diamond on her recent award. Dr Corr also thanked Sharma for sharing her story at what can be a very emotional time. Mrs Murphy asked if there was anything that could have been done earlier in Sharma's journey to help allay her concerns. Sharma said that the midwives in Causeway had been great and she was concerned that the experience would be different in Antrim and that continuity of care was important. She added that she was hopeful that the AMLU would replicate that atmosphere. Mrs Diamond said that the unit has videos available and can arrange visits to help women visualise their experience and help with any anxieties.

The Chair acknowledged that the Trust have to make difficult decisions on service transformation and that the Trust tried to keep service users at the heart of any decision, but the key determinant of a service is not a building but the staff. The Transformation of Maternity Services is something for the staff to be proud of and, whilst also recognising that staff may have had concerns about the transformation, the team worked really well to facilitate the move. Ms O'Reilly was looking forward to visiting the unit and thanked Sharma and Mrs Diamond for attending Trust Board.

TB131/25 Performance Report as at 31st October 2025

Mr Martin began by advised members that he would be happy to take any queries and that he would be focusing on two areas; use of Waiting List Funding and Waiting Times for AHPs.

Mr Martin outline the range and volume of services delivered under the Waiting List Initiative (WLI). During the period from April 2025 to December 2025 the Trust had spent £14million on WLI activity, 90% of which was delivered in the independent sector and 10% inhouse. This represented a total of 23,000 patients and included, for example, outpatient transfers, diagnostics, in-patient theatre and diagnostics and both administrative and clinical validation. The number of patients waiting over 52 weeks for an inpatient or day case had reduced from 4,200 to 3,100 from April to October 2025, and those waiting over 26 weeks for routine endoscopies had reduced from 1,600 to 850 over the same period.

In relation to AHP waiting times, Mr Martin explained that there were six professions included; Speech and Language Therapy (SLT), Podiatry, Orthoptics, Dietetics, Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy (OT). Physiotherapy has the most waits; 10,000, with OT having 7,000. Mr Martin added that 90% of service users were waiting less than a year and advised that AHP Services are managed in separate divisions.

Mrs Harris provided an update on dietetics and noted that there had been a 69% increase in adult referrals and 61% in child referrals. The service has reviewed the referrals and confirmed that they were appropriate. The team are also looking at any urgent waits and considering in-reach to care homes. Mrs Harris said that the dietetic service was very eclectic and there was also a review of data recording in Multi-disciplinary teams to ascertain if there were any patterns or complex cases.

Mrs Spence informed Trust Board that OT provides a range of services, which sit professionally within Community Care but are delivered across a number of operational divisions. The longest waits are in elder care and a recovery plan is being developed. There has also been an increase in demand coupled with an increase in absence, which has been challenging. The Team receives a lot of queries and a senior review will be put in place to look at waiting lists and to avoid escalation where possible.

Maura Dargan spoke on paediatric OT and SLT and said that the commissioning of AHP services had not kept pace with the growth in Special Education Needs (SEN). This growth has impacted on waiting lists but the last additional funding was received in 2021/22. Maura Dargan added that there is an action plan in place, there are workforce concerns and that a risk-based approach is being taken with ongoing triage and validation of the waiting list. In adult SLT, demand versus capacity is an issue and again a risk-based approach is taken. The team are looking at other options, including telehealth, for example.
Mr Rice thanked Mr Martin and the directors for the update. His initial concern was on the unintended consequences of having to wait.

Mr Turley also welcomed the information provided by Mr Martin and Ms Traub on the Winter Plan and asked if there were any concerns with implementation of plans. Ms Traub confirmed that all divisions were proceeding as planned and there would be a stocktake meeting in due course. The Winter Plan had become very much part of business as usual for the Trust.

TB132/25 Statutory Functions – Interim Corporate Parenting Submission

Maura Dargan informed members that the Interim Corporate Parenting Report had been brought to Trust Board to formally record its submission and noted that members received a presentation at the Reserved Session. The Trust was in a slightly improved position compared to 2024/25, due in part to the new student social workers. Risks remain as they were before and workforce challenges, etc, are on the Trust's Corporate Risk Register. Some teams, such as kinship and family support, remain challenged. The Child Protection Register has been validated following a query from the Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG). Mr Lee Wilson, Assistant Director, Social Work Governance, Workforce Development & Training, will share the briefing with members and the Chair encouraged members to send any queries to Mr Wilson or Maura Dargan.

Trust Board retrospectively approved the submission.

TB133/25 Update from Resources Committee

Mr Armstrong spoke briefly on the Update from Resources Committee of 17th September 2025 and noted that there was a further meeting on 1st December 2025 at which the updated financial position would be discussed. Mr Armstrong drew attention to a number of matters reviewed by the committee and noted that there had been a presentation from the Community Care Division on the impact of demographic changes, as well as an update on the Support and Intervention Framework and test drilling of revenue business cases. The committee had also approved the Energy Management and Sustainability Annual Reports. There were no items for escalation to Trust Board at this stage; Mr Armstrong said the committee was beginning to find its' feet.

TB134/25 Update from Audit Committee

Mr Douglas took Trust Board members through the update from the Audit Committee meeting of 20th October. The committee received six Internal Audit Reports; four with limited assurance, one with a split assurance and one satisfactory. Mr Douglas also mentioned that it was reported that 71% of internal audit recommendations had been implemented, 26% partially implemented and 3% were outstanding. The finance team continue to work with divisions to close off outstanding recommendations. The committee also received presentations on Job Planning and Management of General Surgery Triage. Committee members would be meeting in early December to complete the Audit Committee Self-Assessment.

Mr Douglas stated that the main concern for the committee was the outstanding Internal Audit recommendations and they had requested a focus on these from directors. The Trust would not wish to receive an unsatisfactory assurance from the Head of Internal Audit and, whilst recognising that staff are working very hard, this is still a concern. Mrs Pullins advised that this would be on the agenda for the next Strategic

Senior Management Team meeting to ensure a collective focus to the outstanding recommendations.

The Chair was content that senior leaders would focus on this but said she would be keen to avoid a limited assurance and that Trust Board should be sighted on any extenuating circumstances.

Mr Turley referred to the increase in fraud cases and asked what attention is given to this. The Board was assured that it was taken very seriously and Mr Lennon noted that the Trust met regularly with the Counter Fraud Service. Mr Douglas felt it was a positive as the increase in cases was due to increased awareness and reporting.

TB135/25 Update from Charitable Trust Funds Committee

Ms O'Reilly gave Trust Board an update from the recent Charitable Trust Funds Committee meeting and reported that the committee was very well supported by directors and was an important part of the 'DNA' of the Trust. The focus of the committee is to ensure that funding is directed towards areas of greatest need and to bring public attention to the benefits of charitable donations. The Community Care Division gave a presentation at the last meeting, which described the current and planned schemes. There were no issues for escalation to Trust Board.

TB136/65 Finance Report as at 31st October 2025

Mr Lennon presented the Financial Position as at 31st October 2025 and confirmed that the Trust continued to forecast a deficit of £7.3million. Achievement of savings remains on target. It was noted that financial pressures continue across all Trusts. Mr Lennon was happy to take any queries from members. Ms O'Reilly thanked Mr Lennon and asked what preparations were needed if the Trust was unable to breakeven. Mr Lennon said it had not happened before and discussions would be needed closer to year-end. The Chair noted that it remained difficult to reconcile the duties of finance and quality and that Trust Board members may have to stand over a deficit position. Mrs Pullins was keen to ensure Trust Board and Senior Management Team were kept informed of the financial position and directors were being asked if the Trust is spending money well; the average weekly expenditure being £24million. Mrs Harris added that hearing this causes staff to think differently about finance.

TB137/25 Business Cases

Mid Ulster CT Scanner

Ms McCartney spoke to the Business Case for the replacement of the Mid Ulster CT Scanner, which was 18 years old, and would be replaced by a modern, low-dose scanner. This would enable more patients to be scanned and provide back-up for other hospital sites. The preferred option was a straightforward replacement and capital funding was in place.

Mr Turley asked about the cost of building and Mr Graffin explained that this was due to the change in standards and requirements since the original scanner was fitted in 2007.

Trust Board approved the Business Case.

Fit for Purpose Accommodation at Robinson Memorial Hospital

This Business Case was brought to Trust Board for retrospective approval, following approval by the Chair and Senior Management Team to enable the appointment of a contractor. The Outline Business Case had been approved by Trust Board in June 2023. Mrs Spence said that work was due to start in April 2026, which will mean that services will only be affected over one winter period. There had been an increase in costs due to a number of different factors. Funding will be provided by a donation from the Robinson Hospital Charitable Trust and the remainder from the capital allocation.

Trust Board retrospectively approved the Business Case.

Endoscopy DPU Scheme

Dr Gardiner presented a small addendum of £22,717 for the Upgrade of Endoscopy Decontamination Equipment and Ventilation systems in Antrim Hospital Day Procedure Unit. This project was complete.

Trust Board approved the addendum.

TB138/25 Capital Report as at 31st October 2025

Trust Board noted the Capital Report as at 31st October 2025 and Mr Graffin reported no major changes from the previous month. Work continues with divisions on the completion of post project evaluations.

TB139/25 Update on Birch Hill Mental Health Build

Dr Corr confirmed that the Business Case addendum had been submitted to the Department of Health (DOH). The project is one of twelve that are partially completed but funding has not yet been confirmed. The Trust was waiting on the outcome of the budget process and the addendum will not be reviewed until the budget is finalised. An adjournment debate was held at the Northern Ireland Assembly on the matter of Bich Hill. There was a recognition within the debate that Holywell was not fit for purpose. Dr Corr felt the engagement with local political and community reps has been useful.

Mrs Diffin asked if the Trust was able to progress with enabling works but Dr Corr said this had not been agreed and this would, unfortunately, lead to more delays and additional costs.

TB140/25 Write Off of Losses

Mr Lennon presented one Write off for noting. This was in relation to an overpayment of pay in 2014 and it was no longer economically viable to pursue. DOH had approved.

Trust Board noted the Write Off.

TB141/25 Any Other Business

There were no items of Any Other Business raised.

TB142/25 Public Questions

There were no public questions received.

TB143/25 Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will take place on Thursday 22nd January 2026.