

**Partnership Agreement between
The Executive Office (TEO) and The Victims
and Survivors Service (VSS)**

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Introduction

1. The Partnership Agreement

- 1.1 This document sets out the partnership arrangements between The Victims and Survivors Service (VSS), and The Executive Office (TEO). In particular, it explains the overall governance framework within which VSS operates, including the framework through which the necessary assurances are provided to stakeholders. Roles/responsibilities of partners within the overall governance framework are also outlined.
- 1.2 The partnership is based on a mutual understanding of strategic aims and objectives; clear accountability; and a recognition of the distinct roles each party contributes. Underpinning the arrangements are the principles set out in the NI Code of Good Practice '**Partnerships between Departments and Arm's-Length Bodies**' which should be read in conjunction with this document. The principles which are laid out the Code are:

LEADERSHIP

Partnerships work well when Departments and Arm's Length Bodies demonstrate good leadership to achieve a shared vision and effective delivery of public services. Strong leadership will provide inspiration, instil confidence and trust and empower their respective teams to deliver good outcomes for citizens.

PURPOSE

Partnerships work well when the purpose, objectives and roles of Arm's Length Bodies and the sponsor department are clear, mutually understood and reviewed on a regular basis. There needs to be absolute clarity about lines of accountability and responsibility between departments and Arm's Length Bodies. In exercising statutory functions Arm's Length Bodies need to have clarity about how their purpose and objectives align with those of departments.

ASSURANCE

Partnerships work well when departments adopt a proportionate approach to assurance, based on Arm's Length Bodies' purpose and a mutual understanding of risk. Arm's Length Bodies should have robust governance arrangements in place and in turn departments should give Arm's Length Bodies the autonomy to deliver effectively. Management information should be what is needed to enable departments and Arm's Length Bodies to provide assurance and assess performance.

VALUE

Partnerships work well when departments and Arm's Length Bodies share knowledge, skills and experience in order to enhance their impact and delivery. Arm's Length Bodies are able to contribute to policy making and departmental priorities. There is a focus on innovation, and on how departments and Arm's Length Bodies work together to deliver the most effective policies and services for its customers.

ENGAGEMENT

Partnerships work well when relationships between departments and Arm's Length Bodies are open, honest, constructive and based on trust. There is mutual understanding about each other's objectives and clear expectations about the terms of engagement.

A full copy of the NI Code can be found at Annex 8.

1.3 This document should also be read in conjunction with guidance on proportionate autonomy which provides an outline of the principles and characteristics for proportionate autonomy. Guidance on proportionate autonomy has been considered in determining the extent of engagement and assurance to be established between VSS and the TEO and this is reflected in this agreement.

1.4 TEO and VSS are committed to:

- Working together within distinct roles and responsibilities;
- Maintaining focus on successful delivery of Programme for Government outcomes and Ministerial priorities (see also paras 2.6 and 2.7);
- Maintaining open and honest communication and dialogue;
- Keeping each other informed of any issues and concerns, and of emerging areas of risk;

- Supporting and challenging each other on developing policy and delivery [when developing policy this may cut across more than one department];
- Seeking to resolve issues quickly and constructively; and
- Acting at all times in the public interest and in line with the values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality.

1.5 The effectiveness of the partnership and the associated Engagement Plan will be reviewed each year by TEO and VSS in order to assess whether the partnership is operating as intended and to identify any emerging issues/opportunities for enhancement. This can be carried out as part of existing governance arrangements and added to the Q1 Accountability Meeting agenda. The Partnership Agreement document itself will be reviewed formally at least once every three years to ensure it remains fit for purpose and up-to-date in terms of current governance frameworks. The formal review will be proportionate to VSS' size and overall responsibilities and will be published on TEO and VSS websites as soon as practicable following completion.

1.6 A copy of this agreement has been placed in the Assembly Library and is available on the TEO and VSS websites.

VSS Establishment and Purpose

2. Statutory Purpose and Strategic Objectives

2.1 For policy & administrative purposes, VSS is classified as an executive non-departmental public body (NDPB), established under The Companies Act 2006 as a company limited by guarantee. For national accounts purposes VSS is classified to the central government sector.

2.2 VSS' functions, duties and powers are as follows:

Functions:

Provide grant-in-aid to voluntary and community groups for the provision of services to victims and survivors;

Secure through the provision of an appropriate range of support services and other initiatives a measurable improvement in the wellbeing of victims and survivors;

Address the practical and other needs of victims and survivors in a co-ordinated manner;

Ensure that services for victims and survivors are provided in response to assessed need, adhere to published standards and are designed to have clear outcomes;

Promote collaborative working between statutory and voluntary organisations, community groups and others, where practicable;

Assist victims and survivors, where this is consistent with their wishes and wellbeing, to play a central role, as part of wider society in addressing the legacy of the past;

Assist victims and survivors to contribute to building a shared and better future; and

Provide, arrange or otherwise facilitate funding, support and services for such other categories of individuals as the Executive Office may from time to time direct.

Duties: None.

Powers:

The VSS will provide support and assistance as per the functions listed above to: (i) victims and survivors; and (ii) such other categories of individuals as the Executive Office may from time to time direct.

The VSS will be responsible for the administration of funding and resources for victims and survivors; and (ii) such other categories of individuals as the Executive Office may from time to time direct. This will include the commissioning of services and the assessment of need.

2.3 The VSS is a company limited by guarantee.

2.4 The First and deputy First Ministers are answerable to the Assembly for the overall performance and delivery of both TEO and VSS.

2.5 The Executive's outcome-based approach to delivery recognises the importance of arm's length bodies and departments working collaboratively and together in a joined up approach to improve overall outcomes and results.

2.6 To that end there is strategic alignment between the aims, objectives and expected outcomes and results of VSS and TEO.

2.7 The strategic outcomes of VSS are:

- Improved health and wellbeing of victims and survivors;
- Victims and survivors, and those most in need, are helped and cared for;
- Improved access to opportunities for learning and development;
- Victims and survivors, and their families, are supported to engage in legacy issues; and
- An effective and efficient organisation.

VSS Governance Arrangements

3. Organisational Status

- 3.1 VSS is a legal entity in its own right, employing its own staff and operating at arm's-length from TEO. As a legal entity it must comply with all associated legislation including legislation relating to its employer status.

4. Governance Framework

- 4.1 VSS has an established Corporate Governance Framework which reflects all relevant good practice guidance. The framework includes the governance structures established within VSS and the internal control and risk management arrangements in place. This includes its Board and Committee Structure.
- 4.2 An account of this is included in the VSS annual Governance Statement together with the VSS Board's assessment of its compliance with the extant Corporate Governance Code of Good Practice (NI). Any departure from the Corporate Governance Code must be explained in the Governance Statement. The extant Corporate Governance Code of Good Practice (NI) is available on the DoF website.
- 4.3 VSS is required to follow the principles, rules, guidance and advice in *Managing Public Money Northern Ireland*. A list of other applicable guidance and instructions which VSS is required to follow is set out in Annex 6. Good governance should also include positive stakeholder engagement, the building of positive relationships and a listening and learning culture.

5. VSS Board

- 5.1 VSS is led by a Board, non-executive members of which are appointed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Board is comprised of a Chair and seven members. Although VSS is not yet CPANI regulated the appointment

process for non-executive Board members is conducted in the spirit of the Code of Practice on Public Appointments for Northern Ireland.

- 5.2 As Public Appointees Board members are office holders rather than employees they are not subject to employee terms and conditions. Board appraisal arrangements are set out in paras 15.1 and 15.2, and matters for consideration in dealing with concerns/complaints in respect of Board members are provided in Annex 5.
- 5.3 The Board's operating framework/terms of reference provides further detail on roles and responsibilities and should align closely with this Partnership Agreement. VSS is a company limited by guarantee with no shareholding and so its Directors duties are set out within the Companies Act 2006, specifically Chapter 2, Section 170 – 177.
- 5.4 The purpose of the VSS Board is to provide effective leadership and strategic direction to the organisation and to ensure that the policies and priorities set by the First Minister and deputy First Minister for *TEO* are implemented. It is responsible for ensuring that the organisation has effective and proportionate governance arrangements in place and an internal control framework which allow risks to be effectively identified and managed. The Board will set the culture and values of the organisation, and set the tone for the organisation's engagement with stakeholders and customers.
- 5.5 The Board is responsible for holding the Chief Executive to account for the management of the organisation and the delivery of agreed plans and outcomes. The Board should also however support the Chief Executive as appropriate in the exercise of their duties.
- 5.6 Board members act solely in the interests of VSS and must not use the Board as a platform to champion their own interests or pursue personal agendas. They occupy a position of trust and their standards of action and behaviour must be exemplary and in line with the seven principles of public life (Nolan principles). VSS has a Board Code of Conduct and there are mechanisms in place to deal with any Board disputes/conflicts to ensure they do not become wider issues that

impact on the effectiveness of the Board. A Board Register of Interests is maintained, kept up to date and is publicly available to help provide transparency and promote public confidence in VSS.

5.7 Communication and relationships within the Board are underpinned by a spirit of trust and professional respect. The Board recognises that using consensus to avoid conflict or encouraging members to consistently express similar views or consider only a few alternative views does not encourage constructive debate and does not give rise to an effective Board dynamic.

5.8 It is for the Board to decide what information it needs, and in what format, for its meetings/effective operation. If the Board is not confident that it is being fully informed about the organisation this will be addressed by the Chair of the Board as the Board cannot be effective with out-of-date or only partial knowledge.

5.9 In order to fulfil their duties, Board members must undertake initial training, and regular ongoing training and development. Review of Board skills and development will be a key part of the annual review of Board effectiveness.

6. Audit and Risk Assurance Committee

6.1 A further important aspect of VSS governance framework is its Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, established in line with the extant Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Handbook (NI).

6.2 The Audit and Risk Assurance Committee's purpose/role is to support the Accounting Officer and Board on governance issues. In line with the handbook the Audit and Risk Assurance Committees focuses on:

- assurance arrangements over governance; financial reporting; annual reports and accounts, including the Governance Statement; and
- ensuring there is an adequate and effective risk management and assurance framework in place.

6.3 VSS and TEO have agreed arrangements in respect of Audit and Risk Assurance Committees which may include:

- attendance by departmental representatives in an observer capacity at VSS's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee meetings;
- Access to VSS Audit and Risk Assurance Committee papers and minutes;
- Any input required from VSS's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee to the departmental Audit and Risk Assurance Committee.

6.4 Full compliance with the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Handbook (NI) is an essential requirement. In the event of significant non-compliance with the handbook's five good practice principles (or other non-compliance) discussion will be required with the Department and a full explanation provided in the annual Governance Statement.

6.5 The extant Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Handbook (NI) is available on the DoF website.

7. VSS Chair

7.1 The Chair is responsible for setting the agenda and managing the Board to enable collaborative and robust discussion of issues. The Chair's role is to develop and motivate the Board and ensure effective relationships in order that the Board can work collaboratively to reach a consensus on decisions. To achieve this, he or she should ensure:

- The Board has an appropriate balance of skills appropriate to its business;
- Board members are fully briefed on terms of appointment, duties, rights and responsibilities;
- Board members receive and maintain appropriate training;
- The Ministers are advised of VSS needs when board vacancies arise;
- There is a Board Operating Framework in place setting out the roles and responsibilities of the Board in line with relevant guidance;
- There is a code of practice for Board members in place, consistent with relevant guidance.

7.2 The role also requires the establishment of an effective working relationship with the Chief Executive that is simultaneously collaborative and challenging. It is important that the Chair and Chief Executive act in accordance with their distinct roles and responsibilities as laid out in Managing Public Money and their appointment letters.

7.3 The Chair has a presence in the organisation and cultivates external relationships which provide useful links for the organisation while being mindful of overstepping boundaries and becoming too involved in day to day operations or executive activities.

8. VSS Chief Executive

8.1 The role of the VSS Chief Executive is to run VSS business. The Chief Executive is responsible for all executive management matters affecting the organisation and for leadership of the executive management team.

8.2 The Chief Executive is designated as VSS Accounting Officer by the departmental Accounting Officer (see section 12). As Accounting Officer they are responsible for safeguarding the public funds in their charge and ensuring they are applied only to the purposes for which they were voted and more generally for efficient and economical administration.

8.3 The Chief Executive is accountable to the Board for VSS performance and delivery of outcomes and targets and is responsible for implementing the decisions of the Board and its Committees. They maintain a dialogue with the Chair on the important strategic issues facing the organisation and for proposing Board agendas to the Chair to reflect these. They ensure effective communication with stakeholders and communication on this to the Board. They also ensure that the Chair is alerted to forthcoming complex, contentious or sensitive issues, including risks affecting the organisation.

8.4 The Chief Executive acts as a role model to other executives by exhibiting open support for the Chair and Board members and the contribution they make. The Chair and Chief Executive have agreed how they will work together in practice,

understanding and respecting each other's role, including the Chief Executive's responsibility as Accounting Officer.

- 8.5 Further detail on the role and responsibilities of the Chief Executive are as laid out in Managing Public Money NI and their Accounting Officer appointment letter.

The Chief Executive's role as Principal Officer for Ombudsman Cases

- 8.6 The Chief Executive is the Principal Officer for handling cases involving the NI Public Sector Ombudsman. They shall advise the departmental Accounting Officer of any complaints about VSS accepted by the Ombudsman for investigation, and about the proposed response to any subsequent recommendations from the Ombudsman.

Role of the TEO

9. Partnership Working with VSS

- 9.1 The *TEO* and *VSS* are part of a total delivery system, within the same Ministerial portfolio. The partnership between *TEO* and *VSS* is open, honest, constructive and based on trust. There is mutual understanding of each other's objectives and clear expectations on the terms of engagement.
- 9.2 In exercising its functions *VSS* has absolute clarity on how its purpose and objectives align with those of *TEO*. There is also a shared understanding of the risks that may impact on each other and these are reflected in respective Risk Registers.
- 9.3 There is a regular exchange of skills and experience between *TEO* and *VSS* and where possible joint programme/project delivery boards/ arrangements. *VSS* may also be involved as a partner in policy/strategy development and provides advice on policy implementation/ the impact of policies in practice.
- 9.4 The Department of Finance (DoF) has established, on behalf of the Assembly, a delegated authority framework which sets out the circumstances where prior DoF approval is required before expenditure can be occurred or commitments entered into. The Accounting Officer of the *TEO* has established an internal framework of delegated authority for the Department and its ALBs: [TEO Expenditure Approval Guidance \(CG 01/22 | NICS Intranet\)](#)[TEO Expenditure Approval Guidance \(CG 01/22 | NICS Intranet\)](#) which apply to *VSS*. Other specific approval requirements established in respect of *VSS* as set out at Annex 3.
- 9.5 Once *VSS* budget has been approved by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, *VSS* shall have authority to incur expenditure approved in the budget without further reference to *TEO* Department. Inclusion of any planned and approved expenditure in the budget shall not however remove the need to seek formal departmental approval where proposed expenditure is outside the

delegated limits (as laid out in Annex 3) or is for new schemes not previously agreed. Nor does it negate the need to follow due processes laid out in guidance contained in Managing Public Money NI and the NI Guide to Expenditure Appraisal and Evaluation. VSS staff costs approvals should be in line with the TEO Expenditure Approval Guidance (CG01/22).

10. Lead Official

10.1 TEO has appointed a lead senior official at Grade 5 level, supported by a Sponsorship Team to manage the relationship with VSS and ensure effective partnership working. Engagement between TEO and VSS will be co-ordinated, collaborative and consistent. The Grade 5, Sponsorship Team and colleagues in the VSS will work together to ensure a clear sense of collaboration and partnership will be communicated to staff in both TEO and VSS in order to promote mutual understanding and support.

10.2 The lead official is the Grade 5 Director for Victims and Survivors and has a clear understanding of VSS responsibilities for policy implementation/operational delivery and the relevant audiences/stakeholders involved.

10.3 The lead senior official will ensure that where there are departmental staff changes, time is taken to ensure they have a full understanding of VSS business and challenges.

11. Annual Engagement Plan

11.1 The Department and VSS will agree an engagement plan before the start of each business year. The Annual Engagement Plan (Annex 2) will set out the timing and nature of engagement between VSS and the Department. The engagement plan will be specific to VSS and should not stray into operational oversight.

11.2 Engagement between the Department's lead official/their teams and VSS will be centred on partnership working, understanding of shared risks and working together on business developments that align with policy objectives.

11.3 In line with relevant guidance¹, VSS will work in collaboration and partnership with the Department to prepare corporate and business plans. There should be good high level strategic alignment between departmental and VSS plans. Once approved it will be the Board of VSS that primarily holds the Chief Executive to account for delivery and performance. The Department will engage with VSS on areas of strategic interest, linking departmental policy and VSS delivery of policy intent.

11.4 The Annual Engagement Plan will also reference the agreed management and financial information to be shared over the course of a year. The aim will be to ensure clear understanding of why information is necessary and how it will be used. Where the same, or similar information is required for internal governance information requirements will be aligned so that a single report can be used for both purposes. In addition, the engagement plan should consider opportunities for learning and development, growth and actions which could help achieve better outcomes.

12. Departmental Accounting Officer

12.1 The departmental Accounting Officer is accountable to the NI Assembly for the issue of grant in aid to VSS. They have designated the Chief Executive of VSS as VSS Accounting Officer and respective responsibilities of the departmental Accounting Officer and the VSS Accounting Officer are set out in Chapter 3 of Managing Public Money Northern Ireland. The departmental Accounting Officer may withdraw the VSS Accounting Officer designation if they conclude that the VSS Accounting Officer is no longer a fit person to carry out the responsibilities of an Accounting Officer or that it is otherwise in the public interest that the designation be withdrawn. In such circumstances the VSS Board will be given a full account of the reasons for withdrawal and a chance to make representations. Withdrawal of VSS Accounting Officer status would bring into question employment as Chief Executive and the Chair should engage with the Department should such circumstances arise.

¹ Guidance issued by TEO on NICS Work Programme which includes guidance on business planning for an outcomes-based PfG/ODP

12.2 As outlined in section 8, the VSS Chief Executive is accountable to the VSS Board for his/her stewardship of VSS. This includes advising the Board on matters of financial propriety, regularity, prudent and economical administration, efficiency and effectiveness.

12.3 The departmental Accounting Officer must be informed in the event that the judgement of the VSS Accounting Officer (on matters for which they are responsible) is over-ridden by the VSS Board. The VSS Accounting Officer must also take action if the VSS Board is contemplating a course that would infringe the requirement for financial propriety, regularity, prudent and economical administration, efficiency or effectiveness. In all other regards, the departmental Accounting Officer has no day to day involvement with VSS or its' Chief Executive.

12.4 In line with DoF requirements, the VSS Accounting Officer will provide a periodic declaration of fitness to act as Accounting Officer to the departmental Accounting Officer. This is provided quarterly within the VSS Assurance Statements.

13. Attendance at Public Accounts Committee

13.1 The VSS Chief Executive/Accounting Officer may be summoned to appear before the Public Accounts Committee to give evidence on the discharge of their responsibilities as Accounting Officer (as laid out in their Accounting Officer appointment letter) on issues arising from the C&AG's studies or reports following the annual audit of accounts.

13.2 The Chair may also, on occasion, be called to give evidence to the Public Accounts Committee on such relevant issues arising within the C&AG's studies or reports, in relation to the role and actions taken by the Board, where appropriate.

13.3 In addition, the *TEO* Accounting Officer may be summoned to appear before the Public Accounts Committee to give evidence on the discharge of their responsibilities as departmental Accounting Officer with overarching responsibility for VSS. In such circumstances, the departmental accounting

Officer may therefore expect to be questioned on their responsibilities to ensure that:

- there is a clear strategic control framework for the ALB;
- sufficient and appropriate management and financial controls are in place to safeguard public funds;
- the nominated Accounting Officer is fit to discharge his or her responsibilities;
- there are suitable internal audit arrangements;
- accounts are prepared in accordance with the relevant legislation and any accounting direction; and
- intervention is made, where necessary, in situations where the ALB Accounting Officer's advice on transactions in relation to regularity, propriety or value for money is overruled by the body's Board or its Chair.

Assurance Framework

14. Autonomy and Proportionality

14.1 *TEO* will ensure that *VSS* has the autonomy to deliver effectively, recognising its status as a separate legal entity which has its own Board and governance arrangements. Guidance on proportionate autonomy has been considered in determining the extent of engagement and assurance established between *VSS* and the *TEO* and is reflected in this agreement.

14.2 A proportionate approach to assurance will be taken based on *VSS* overall purpose, business and budget and a mutual understanding of risk. The approach will include an agreed process through which the *VSS* Accounting Officer provides written assurance to the Department that the public funds and organisational assets for which they are personally responsible are safeguarded, have been managed with propriety and regularity, and use of public funds represents value for money.

14.3 Recognising the governance arrangements in place within the organisation, the *VSS* Accounting Officer will arrange for the Chair of the ALB Board to have sight of the assurance statement, prior to being submitted to the Department. The Assurance statement is also shared with both the ARAC and the Board for review and consideration at their meetings immediately following the quarter end

14.4 The minutes of the *VSS* Board Meeting will document confirmation that the *VSS* Accounting Officer's formal assurance has been considered by the Board and is reflective of *VSS* current position.

14.5 In addition to the *VSS* Accounting Officer's written assurance, the Department will take assurance from the following key aspects of *VSS* own governance framework:

- Annual Review of Board Effectiveness;
- Completion of Board Appraisals which confirm Board member effectiveness;

- Internal Audit assurance and External Quality Assessment of the Internal Audit function;
- Externally audited Annual Report and Accounts, reviewed/considered by the VSS Audit and Risk Assurance Committee.

15. Board Effectiveness

15.1 The VSS Chair will ensure that the VSS Board undertakes an annual review of Board Effectiveness² which encompasses committees established by the Board.

15.2 The Chair will discuss the outcome of the annual review of Board Effectiveness with the lead official to ensure a partnership approach to any improvements identified. This will inform the annual programme of Board training/development and discussions in respect of Board composition and succession.

15.3 In line with any parameters set out in founding (or other) legislation, the Chair in conjunction with the Department, and Ministers where appropriate, will consider the size and composition of the VSS Board, proportionate to the size and complexity of VSS and keep this under review.

15.4 In addition to the annual review of Board Effectiveness VSS will undertake an external review of Board effectiveness at least once every three years covering the performance of the Board, its Committees and individual Board members. The Chair will liaise with the Department to identify a suitably skilled facilitator for the external review (this can be a peer review, and should be proportionate) and will share the findings/outcome report with the Department on completion of the review.

16. Board Appraisals

16.1 The Chair of VSS will conduct an annual appraisal in respect of each Board member which will also inform the annual programme of Board training/development. The Chair will engage with the Chief Executive/lead official as

² NIAO Good Practice Guide on Board Effectiveness

appropriate on improvements identified through the appraisal process and the annual training/development programme.

16.2 The Chair's annual appraisal will be completed by TEO Deputy Secretary. The appraisal will take account of the Key Characteristics of a good chairperson (particularly for the Chair to have well developed interpersonal skills) set out in the NIAO Good Practice Guide on Board Effectiveness available on the NIAO website. There will be close engagement between the Chair and the lead official on improvements identified through the appraisal process.

17. Internal Audit Assurance

17.1 VSS is required to establish and maintain arrangements for an internal audit function that operates in accordance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS). The *TEO* must be satisfied with the competence and qualifications of the Head of Internal Audit and that the requirements for approving appointments are in accordance with PSIAS.

17.2 In the event that the internal audit function is contracted out VSS shall ensure the *TEO* is satisfied that the contract specification for the internal audit service meets the requirements of PSIAS.

17.3 VSS will provide its internal audit strategy, periodic audit plans and annual audit report, including the Head of Internal Audit's opinion on risk management, control and governance to the Department. VSS will ensure the *TEO's* internal audit team have complete right of access to all relevant records. This applies whether the internal audit function is provided in-house or is contracted out.

17.4 VSS will ensure regular, periodic self-assessments are completed by the internal audit function in line with PSIAS, and copies of the self-assessment reports are provided to VSS. VSS will share these with the Department. VSS will also ensure that an External Quality Assessment (EQA) of the internal audit function which (in line with PSIAS) is required to be conducted at least once every five years by a qualified independent assessor.

17.5 VSS will alert the Department to any less than satisfactory audit reports at the earliest opportunity on an ongoing basis. VSS will also alert the Department to a less than satisfactory annual opinion from the Head of Internal Audit at the earliest opportunity. VSS and the Department will then engage closely on actions required to address the less than satisfactory opinion in order to move VSS to a satisfactory position as soon as possible.

17.6 The Department will take assurance from the fact that VSS has met the requirements of PSIAS and has a satisfactory annual opinion from the Head of Internal Audit as part of its overall assurance assessment.

18. Externally Audited Annual Report and Accounts

18.1 VSS is required to prepare an Annual Report and Accounts in line with the Government Financial Reporting Manual (FReM) issued by the Department of Finance (DoF) and the specific Accounts Direction issued by TEO, and in accordance with the deadlines specified.

18.2 The Comptroller & Auditor General (C&AG) will arrange to audit the VSS annual accounts and will issue an independent opinion on the accounts. On completion of audit, VSS shall lay them before the NI Assembly together with its annual report, in accordance with the up to date guidance issued by DoF in relation to the Laying of Annual Report and Accounts in the Northern Ireland Assembly. VSS provides a record of laying to the TEO Victims Unit. Subsequent to laying before the Assembly, VSS must also then file its accounts with Companies House.

18.3 The C&AG will also provide a Report to Those Charged with Governance (RTTCWG) to VSS which will be shared with the Department.

18.4 VSS will alert the Department to any likely qualification of the accounts at the earliest opportunity. In the event of a qualified audit opinion or significant issues reported in the RTTCWG the Department will engage with VSS on actions required to address the qualification/significant issues.

- 18.5 The Department will take assurance from the external audit process and an unqualified position as part of its overall assurance assessment.
- 18.6 The C&AG may carry out examinations into the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which VSS has used its resources in discharging its functions. The C&AG may also carry out thematic examinations that encompass the functions of VSS.
- 18.7 For the purpose of audit and any other examinations, the C&AG has statutory access to documents as provided for under Articles 3 and 4 of the Audit and Accountability (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.
- 18.8 Where making payment of a grant, or drawing up a contract, VSS should ensure that it includes a clause which makes the grant or contract conditional upon the recipient or contractor providing access to the C&AG in relation to documents relevant to the transaction. Where subcontractors are likely to be involved, it should also be made clear that the requirements extend to them.

Signatories

VSS and the TEO agree to work in partnership with each other in line with the NI Code of Good Practice '**Partnerships between Departments and Arm's Length Bodies**' and the arrangements set out in this Agreement.



Signed (ALB Chair)

Date: 07 August 2025



Signed (ALB Chief Executive)

Date: 07 August 2025



Signed (TEO Departmental Accounting Officer)

Date 08 August 2025

Annex 1 - Applicable Legislation

List the founding legislation and other key statutes which provide VSS with its statutory functions, duties and powers.

The Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006

Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2024


Annex 2 – Illustrative Annual Engagement Plan

Good engagement is one of the key principles in the Partnership Code, underpinning the other principles of: Leadership; Purpose; Assurance; and Value.

As laid out in the Code, partnerships work well when relationships between departments and ALBs are open, transparent, honest, constructive and based on trust and when there is mutual understanding of each other’s objectives and clear expectations about the terms of engagement.

The template provided outlines the key areas of engagement between Departments and ALBs. The template is not intended to be prescriptive and should be completed collaboratively and agreed between the Department and the ALB.

Engagement Plan 2025/26			
Policy Development and Delivery			
Policy Area	Activity	Frequency/Timing	Lead Departmental/ALB Officials
All	TEO Lead Official to meet with VSS Board	At least once per annum	TEO ST G5 VSS CEO
T/C – Victims and Survivors Strategy	Partnership Meeting	Quarterly April 2025 July 2025 October 2025 January 2026	TEO ST G5 VSS CEO
T/C – TPDPS	TPDPS Sectoral Engagement Groups Meetings Partnership Meeting	2/3 per annum April 2025 July 2025 October 2025 January 2026	TEO ST G5 VSS HCP TEO ST G5 VSS CEO
Regional Trauma Network (RTN)	RTN Partnership Board Partnership Meeting	Quarterly Quarterly April 2025 July 2025 October 2025 January 2026	TEO ST G5 VSS CEO TEO ST G5 VSS CEO

T/C – Peace Plus	Partnership Meeting	Quarterly April 2025 July 2025 October 2025 January 2026	TEO ST G5 VSS CEO
HIA	Project Board Review of services (5 years) Partnership Meeting	Quarterly One-off in 2025/26 Quarterly April 2025 July 2025 October 2025 January 2026	TEO G3 VSS HHWB
MBMLW	Truth Recovery Programme Truth Recovery Cross Departmental Programme Board Partnership Meeting	Monthly Quarterly Quarterly April 2025 July 2025 October 2025 January 2026	TEO G5 (TRP) VSS CEO/HHWB TEO G3 & G5 CSS CEO/HHWB TEO ST G5 VSS CEO
Strategic Planning			
Policy Area	Activity	Frequency/Timing	Lead Departmental/ALB Officials
VSS Programmes – VSP and INP (2026/27 – 2027/28)	Development of Business Case (TEO led)  VSP Outline Timeline.msg Informed by input on departmental priorities, plans, available budgets and risks.	Commencing Sept 2024 to be approved by July 2025	TEO Sponsor Team (ST) G7 VSS HoLG/HoCS

All	<p>2026 – 2029 Corporate Plan with 2026/27 Business Plan:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Engagement on the draft business plan and identification of areas of strategic interest to the department to inform further scheduled engagement during the year, (will require TEO to set a planning budget across all areas) 2. Submission/Presentation of the VSS Business Plan 3. Approval of the VSS Business Plan 	<p>October 2025 (Pre-Board)</p> <p>January 2026 (draft, subject to budget)</p> <p>April 2026</p>	<p>TEO Sponsor Team (ST) G7 VSS HoCS</p> <p>Senior Sponsor to secure all relevant departmental and ministerial approvals for the ALB Business Plan</p>
HIA	Review of Services at 5 years, in line with Hart Recommendation	TBA	TEO ST G5 VSS CEO
MBMLW	<p>Business Case, encompassing service delivery (3+1+1 years).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Co-ordination of service scale up in support of wider TRP activity 	Ongoing	TEO ST G5 VSS CEO/HHWB/HCS
TPDPS	Victims Payments OBC Addendum	Commencing Dec 2024	TEO ST G5/TEO TPDPS G7 VSS HCP/HCS

Joint Working

Policy Area	Activity	Frequency/Timing	Lead Departmental/ALB Officials
Review format of Accountability Meeting – to be renamed Partnership Meeting	Partnership Meeting	Quarterly April 2025 July 2025 October 2025 January 2026	TEO ST G5 VSS CEO
Board Appointments			
Activity	Date	Lead Departmental/ALB Official	
Appointment of Chair and Board Members	Ongoing	TEO ST G5 VSS CEO	
Succession planning (early engagement)	As appropriate		
Chief Executive Recruitment			
Activity	Date	Lead Departmental/ALB Official	
VSS to inform TEO at earliest opportunity if vacancy is arising	As arises		
Assurances			
Item and purpose	Date	Lead Departmental/ALB Official	
Outcome of Board review of effectiveness - Annual review - Externally facilitated triennial review	April 2025 TBA	VSS Chair with TEO ST G5 VSS Chair with TEO ST G5	
VSS Chair Appraisal Board Appraisals Board Training and Development Plans	Q1 2025/26, subject to completion of the Board appraisals and annual review of Board effectiveness March 2026 Ongoing	TEO Deputy Secretary, VSS Chair	
Departmental attendance at VSS ARC	Quarterly at scheduled meetings	TEO ST DP	




Assurance Statement	Quarterly, deadlines set by TEO	TEO ST, VSS CEO/HoCS
ALB Report	Quarterly, deadlines set by TEO	TEO ST, VSS CEO/HoCS
Governance Statement, Annual Report and Accounts (Via ARC)	August 2025	TEO ST, VSS HoCS
Head of Internal Audit Annual Report/opinion (Via ARC)	August 2025	TEO ST, VSS HoCS
Internal Audit Strategy/plan 2025/26 (via ARC)	August 2025	TEO ST, VSS HoCS
Internal Audit External Quality Assessment	CK EQA due March 2026	TEO ST, VSS HoCS

Budget Management

Item and Purpose	Date	Lead Departmental/ALB Official
Engagement on budget requirements and forecast expenditure for the financial year	See strategic planning section above October – December 2025	TEO ST G7, VSS HoCS
Departmental approval of annual budget 2026/27	TBA - subject to wider NI budget approval processes	
Monthly financial management returns with monthly cash forecast	Usually first working day following month end	TEO ST, VSS Finance Manager
Monthly cash drawdown request	Usually first working day following month end	TEO ST, VSS Finance Manager
Monitoring round returns	Quarterly in line with DoF timetable	TEO ST, VSS HoCS
Provisional Outturn 2024/25 2025/26	April 2025 April 2026	TEO ST, VSS HoCS
Consolidation accounts and mapping templates	October 2025 January 2026 Final submission April 2026 (12 months to 31 March)	TEO Finance, VSS Finance Manager
Final Outturn 2024/25	October/November 2025	TEO ST, VSS HoCS

Other

Item and Purpose	Date	Lead Departmental/ALB Official
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Accounting Officer - Fitness to Act as Accounting Officer	Quarterly via Assurance Statement: March, June, September & December.	Departmental and VSS Accounting Officers.
Suspected/alleged fraud reporting	Immediate reporting of all frauds (proven or suspected including attempted fraud	TEO ST, VSS HoCS
Compliance with the TEO Fraud Policy and Response Plan  Revised Fraud Policy - June 2022 - Updated  Revised Privacy Notice for TEO Fraud  Revised Fraud Policy DPIA - July 2023.DOC)	Quarterly via Assurance Statement: March, June, September & December.	
Media management protocols <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - VSS to operate a no surprise policy and notify TEO sponsor team of all press releases and or media enquiries where relevant 	As arises	TEO ST, VSS CEO, HoLG
Preparation of Business Cases – TEO and VSS to work together on relevant business cases and share expertise	Ad-hoc	TEO ST, VSS
Review of the Partnership Arrangement		
Item and Purpose	Date	Lead Departmental/ALB Official
Light touch review of the Partnership Agreement	Q1 2025/27 Partnership Meeting	TEO ST, VSS CEO
Formal review of the Partnership Agreement	Q1 2028/29	TEO ST, VSS CEO

Annex 3 - Delegations

Delegated authorities

VSS shall obtain the Department's prior written approval before:

- entering into any undertaking to incur any expenditure that falls outside the delegations or which is not provided for in the ALB's annual budget as approved by the Department;
- incurring expenditure for any purpose that is or might be considered novel or contentious, or which has or could have significant future cost implications;
- making any significant change in the scale of operation or funding of any initiative or particular scheme previously approved by the Department;
- making any change of policy or practice which has wider financial implications that might prove repercussive or which might significantly affect the future level of resources required; or
- carrying out policies that go against the principles, rules, guidance and advice in Managing Public Money Northern Ireland.

Losses and Special Payments

The Chief Executive will have the authority to write off losses and make special payments up to the delegated limits as detailed below (a – h):

- (a) Cash losses – up to £1,000 per case/incident
- (b) Stores/Equipment losses – up to £1,000 per case/incident
- (c) Constructive losses and fruitless payments – up to £1,000 per case.
- (d) Compensation payments – up to £1,000 per case
 - i. Made under legal obligation, e.g. by Court Order – up to £1,000 per case plus reasonable legal expenses
 - ii. For damage to personal property of staff – up to £1,000 per case
 - iii. Where written legal advice is that the VSS should not fight a court action because it is unlikely that it would win – up to £1,000 per case
- (e) Claims abandoned or waiver of claim – up to £1,000 per case
- (f) Extra contractual payments – up to £1,000 per case

- (g) Ex gratia payments – up to £1,000 per case (Pensions payments are not covered by this threshold)
- (h) Extra statutory and extra regulatory payments – no delegation, all proposals must be submitted to the sponsor department for approval

The prior approval of TEO must be obtained for amounts above these delegations listed 7a – h, above. Approval of write-off should be made with the minimum amount of delay.

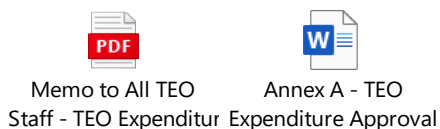
DAO(DoF)08/21 Departmental Delegations/Requirements for DoF approval, provides guidance on when TEO should seek DoF approval on behalf of VSS.

Where total losses and special payments exceed £5,000 in any financial year, an explanatory note should be included in the VSS accounts.

Details of all losses and special payments should be recorded in a Losses and Special Payments Register, which will be available to auditors. The Register should be kept up-to-date and should show evidence of the approval by the Chief Executive, and TEO as necessary.

Specific Delegated Authorities

VSS shall have the financial delegations as set out in MPMNI supplemented by the departmental guidance below (currently CG 01/22) and all other relevant guidance as referred to in Annex 6.



**CG01/22 Table 3 Delegated Limits for Expenditure by ALBs
residing outside the Department’s Accounting Boundary**

Arm’s Length Body	Goods and Services £K	Capital £K	ICT Projects £K	External Consultancy £K	DAC £K
VSS	30	50	10	5	30

These delegations are based on DoF guidelines in effect at 6 April 2022. Any change to those DoF authorities, delegation and processes will update those by default. Otherwise, these delegations shall not be altered without the prior agreement of the Executive Office and, where applicable, DoF.

Pay Remit

VSS Accounting Officer should have the delegated authority to approve VSS pay remits.



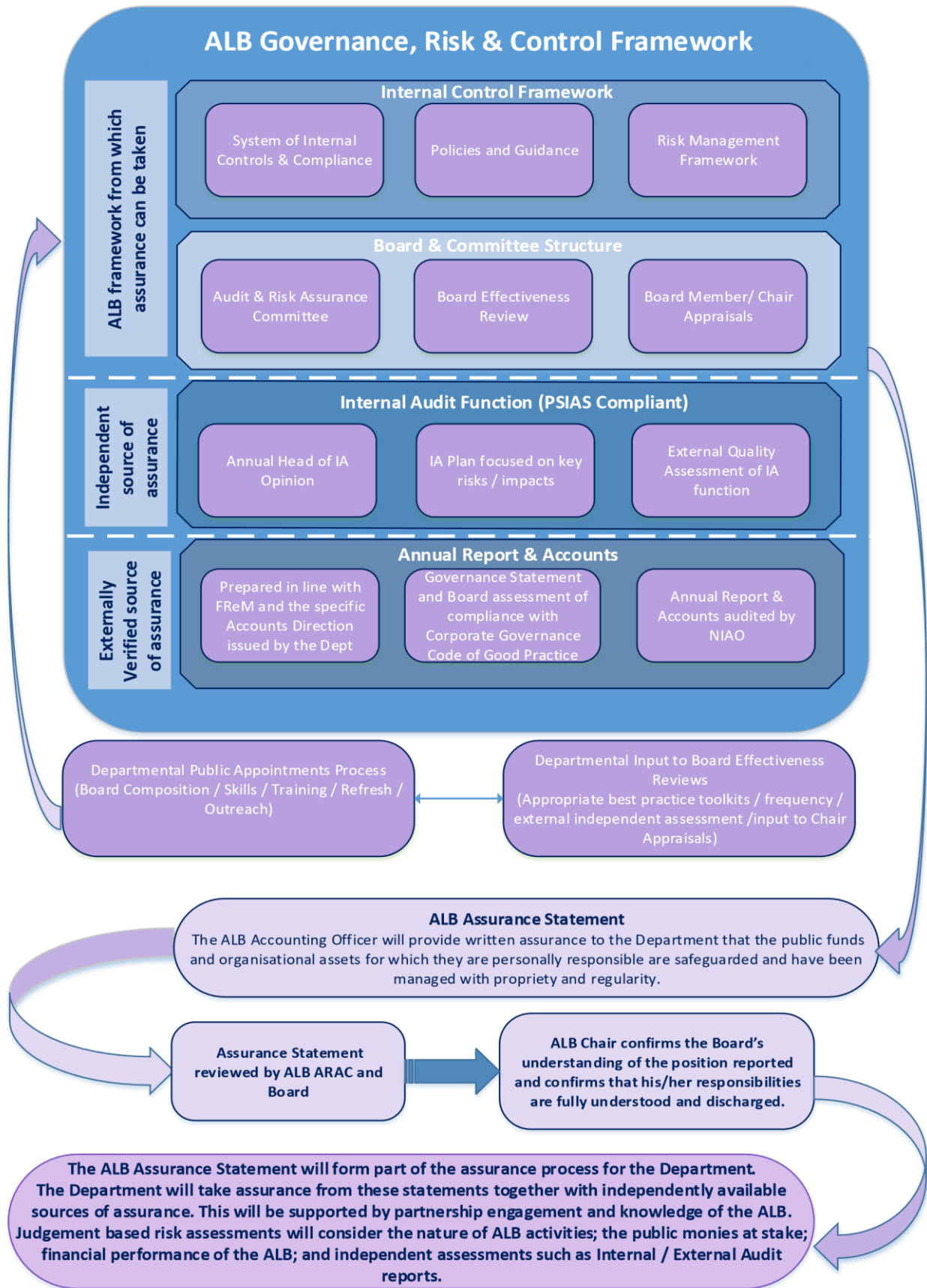
Letter to Mr Andrew Walker - Delegation o

It should be noted that granting such authority to VSS is conditional on the VSS Accounting Officer approving the annual Pay Remit and providing its parent Department, TEO, with a completed pro forma, including confirmation of legal entitlement to the NICS pay award and affordability for the affected staff group prior to implementing the award.

In addition, if VSS goes over and above the NICS pay award, additional payments are included, or indeed VSS decides not to implement any part of the award that there is a legal entitlement to, final approval of the pay remit must be secured from the parent Department and potentially DoF(if required).

Further, it shall remain the responsibility of both VSS and the Department to ensure that all aspects of Northern Ireland public sector pay guidance have been applied, including securing DoF approval for any non-standard terms or condition. Consideration will be given to removing the delegation if VSS does not adhere to the relevant pay remit guidance.

Annex 4 – Illustrative System of Assurance



Annex 5 – Concerns/Complaints in respect of Board members

In line with the NI Code of Good Practice and the arrangements in this Partnership Agreement the approach to concerns/complaints raised in respect of VSS Board members should be transparent and collaborative. The principle of early and open engagement is important, with the Department made aware of any concerns/complaints as soon as practicable.

While Board Members are Public Appointees/office holders rather than VSS employees a VSS employee may utilise VSS grievance procedure/other HR procedure to raise a complaint against a Board member. The VSS employee raising the grievance should expect this to be handled in line with VSS HR procedures.

Concerns/complaints might also be raised through:

- Raising Concerns/Whistleblowing arrangements;
- Complaints processes;
- Directly with VSS or the Department.

Where a concern/complaint is received within VSS in respect of an individual Board Member this should be provided to the VSS Chair who should notify the Department at the outset in order that lead responsibility for handling the complaint/concern is clear in advance.

Where a concern/complaint relates to the VSS Chair, VSS should notify the Department at the outset for the Department to determine the approach to handling the complaint/concern.

Differences of view in relation to matters which fall within the Board's responsibilities are a matter for the Board to resolve through consensus based decision making in the best interests of the VSS.

Exceptionally a concern/complaint may be raised by a Board Member about a fellow Board Member or a senior member of VSS staff. The VSS Chair should notify the Department at the outset to ensure that arrangements for handling the

concern/complaint are clear. The Department may determine that it should make arrangements to deal with the concern/complaint. This will be agreed at the outset.

Arrangements for concerns/complaints in respect of Board members should be reflected in all relevant procedures, including Standing Orders and Board Operating Frameworks.

Annex 6 - Applicable Guidance

The following guidance is applicable to VSS

Guidance issued by the Department of Finance

- Managing Public Money NI
- Public Bodies – A Guide for NI Departments
- Corporate Governance in central government departments – code of good practice
- DoF Risk Management Framework
- HMT Orange Book
- The Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Handbook
- Public Sector Internal Audit Standards
- Accounting Officer Handbook – HMT Regularity, Propriety and Value for Money
- The NI Guide to Expenditure Appraisal and Evaluation
- Dear Accounting Officer Letters
- Dear Finance Director Letters
- Dear Consolidation Officer and Dear Consolidation Manager Letters
- The Consolidation Officer Letter of Appointment
- Government Financial Reporting Manual (FReM)
- Guidance for preparation and publication of annual report and accounts □
Procurement Guidance

Other Guidance and Best Practice

- Specific guidance issued by the Department
- EU Delegations
- Recommendations made by the NI Audit Office/NI Assembly Public Accounts Committee
- NIAO Good Practice Guides
- Guidance issued by the Executive's Asset Management Unit
- NI Public Services Ombudsman guidance

Annex 7 – Role of the Ministers

Role of the Ministers

The Chair of VSS is responsible to the Ministers. Communication between the Board and the Ministers should normally be through the Chair.

The departmental Accounting Officer is responsible for advising the relevant Ministers on a number of issues including the VSS objectives and targets, budgets and performance.

In addition to being answerable to the Assembly as laid out in paragraph 2.4, the Ministers are also responsible for:

- Setting the strategic direction and overall policies and priorities for the ALB as reflected in the PfG;
- Approving the ALB's Business Plan;
- Setting the ALB's budget; and
- Appointment of non-executive board members. The Ministers may also be involved in considering the size and composition of the VSS Board – see para 15.3.

Annex 8 – Partnerships between Departments and Arm’s Length Bodies: NI Code of Good Practice

NI Code of Good Practice



Partnerships
between Department