

## Minutes of the Board Open Session meeting held on 21 January 2026 via Teams

### **CHAIR**

Paula Sussex, CBE, Ombudsman

### **NON-EXECUTIVE MEMBERS**

Polly Curtis, (Senior Non-Executive Member)

John Ainsworth

Anne Davies

Michael Parsons

Anu Singh

Sir Dave Thompson

### **EXECUTIVE MEMBERS**

Rebecca Hilsenrath, Chief Executive Officer

Karl Banister, Director, Operations, Legal and Clinical

### **IN ATTENDANCE**

Scott Stevenson, Director of Strategy and Resources

Barry Topham, Chief Digital and Transformation Officer

Maria Mansfeld, Chief of Staff

Roz Pedersen, Assistant Director, Finance

Hazel Waddington, Assistant Director, Transformation

Donna Linton, Governance and Risk Manager (minutes)

Rhiannon Thomas, Governance Officer

### **APOLOGIES**

Amerdeep Somal

### **OBSERVERS**

None

## **1. Chair's Introduction and Welcome**

1.1 The Chair welcomed members and attendees to the meeting.

1.2 The Chair noted apologies from Amerdeep Clarke.

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

2.1 The Chair declared a potential conflict of interest arising from her former role as Chief Executive of the Charity Commission. David Holdsworth (now CEO of the Charity Commission) was her deputy between 2016-2017.

## **3. Strategic Business Plan 2026/27 and Budget 2026/27**

### **Strategic Business Plan 2026/27**

3.1 The Board received a paper from the Director of Strategy and Resources (DoSR) which presented the proposed Strategic Business Plan activities for feedback in advance being presented to Board on 19 March 2026 for approval.

3.2 The Year 1 Strategic Delivery Plan 2026-27 as detailed at Annex A of the report contained all strategic change activity that was planned to be executed in the first year of the Strategy.

3.3 The Assistant Director, Transformation outlined the Year 1 deliverables and the redesigned format that showed a clear golden thread between strategic objectives, intended outcomes and Year 1 deliverables.

3.4 The Year 1 Strategic Delivery Plan 2026-27 activities had been developed in several iterations across the Senior and Executive Leadership Team and captured Year 1 activity for the 5-year Strategy.

3.5 The Board discussed the Strategic Business Plan 2026/27, including:

- Members supported the customer journey focus that was essential for digital transformation alignment.
- Members welcomed the improved satisfaction measures that would provide more insight during the process rather than at the end.
- Members welcomed the ambitious outcomes which told a story through the key themes and how these build the plan for moving forward. Members urged the service to continue working in this way.
- Members discussed the need for clarity on capability, such as technology, data and system analysis. They stressed the importance of understanding the skills required to improve the service provided.
- Members discussed the systemic themes in detail and the progress which had been made in health commissioning.

3.6 The Assistant Director, Transformation confirmed that the transformation programmes would include maturity assessments. Two internal audits had taken place this year that had provided substantial assurance on process mapping capability.

- 3.7 The Ombudsman and Chief Executive provided further information on the work taking place on systemic themes and outlined some of the challenges the service faced such as external data sharing and lack of regulatory clarity.
- 3.8 Board comments would be taken into account in the final version of the Business Plan 2026/27. The final Business Plan would continue to be developed alongside the Strategy to be presented for approval at the meeting on 19 March 2026.

#### **Budget 2026/27**

- 3.9 The Board received a paper from the Assistant Director of Finance outlining the draft high-level budget for 2026/27 which had been developed to support both the ongoing delivery of the service and the investments required to support the delivery of the first year of the 5-year Strategy.
- 3.10 The Assistant Director, Finance reported that in previous years there had been a degree of optimism bias that had resulted in underspends. In order to mitigate the risk of a reoccurrence, the available contingency on both resources and capital budgets would be reduced and there would be a pipeline of additional activity that could utilise any emerging underspend.
- 3.11 The Board discussed the Budget 2026/27, including:
- Members expressed some caution about removing the contingency entirely.
- 3.12 Members made comments that the amount set for capability development may be insufficient given the strategic ambition.
- Member sought clarity on how demand modelling would be reflected in the budget.
- 3.13 In response to the queries raised, the Assistant Director, Finance advised that the organisation had a strong financial discipline and that budgets would be closely monitored. In response to the query about funding for capability developments, she confirmed that additional requests would be expected throughout the year and the budget had room to accommodate.
- 3.14 The CEO confirmed that the Executive Team would be discussing demand management in detail on 12 February and a more detailed position would be presented to the Strategic Delivery Committee on 4 March and the Board on 19 March 2026.
- 3.15 The Board **noted** the draft budget for 2026/27 that would be presented to the Board for approval at the meeting on 19 March 2026.

#### **4. PHSO name**

- 4.1 The Board received a presentation from the Director of Strategy and Resources (DoSR) which sought Board support and feedback on a new name for PHSO. On 11 December 2025, the Board agreed to progress the proposal to rename the

organisation, which allowed work to proceed on the procurement process to bring in a partner to support the work.

- 4.2 The DoSR provided an overview on the research which had taken place to date and how options for a new name had been considered. The research confirmed that the current name was problematic. It also highlighted that there was no perfect alternative.
- 4.3 There were two preferred options from the shortlist that tested well overall and would fit with the direction of the organisation. These included Option 1 'Public Service/s Ombudsman' and Option 2 'National Ombudsman'.
- 4.4 The preferred option was 'Public Service Ombudsman' and the rationale was detailed in the presentation.
- 4.5 The Board discussed the Budget 2026/27, including:
- Members supported the preferred option as this aligned with the Ombudsman values and strategic direction of the organisation.
  - Members agreed that a strong evidence base existed to support the rename.
- 4.6 Members discussed possible media interest about the cost of change and were assured that the costs were relatively modest.
- 4.7 The Board **supported** the work to change the organisation's name.

## **5. Date and time of next meeting**

- 5.1 The next Board meeting will be on 19 March 2026, 10:00 - 16:00, and will be in person at Citygate, Manchester.

## **6. Review of Meeting**

- 6.1 Members commented that the Strategic Business Plan for 2026/27 was more ambitious than in previous years and had a clearer and more coherent strategic narrative.

**The meeting ended at 11:10**