

**Minutes of the
DoF Departmental Board Meeting**

Held Online

Wednesday 24 February 2021, 14:00

Board Members / Deputies	In Attendance
Sue Gray	Seanin Ferguson (Acting Board Secretary)
Claire Archbold	Anne McCusker (Boardroom Apprentice)
Stewart Barnes	
Siobhan Carey	
Joanne Dowling	
Jill Minne	
Paul Duffy	
Stuart Stevenson for Joanne McBurney	
Mark McLaughlin	
Bill Pauley	
Ian Snowden	
Des Armstrong	
Tom Taylor (NEBM)	
John Smyth (NEBM)	
Liz Ensor (NEBM)	

1. Welcome/Apologies

Sue Gray welcomed Members to the meeting, noting an apology from Joanne McBurney (Stuart Stevenson deputising).

No conflicts of interest were registered.

2. Minutes and Matters Arising

Members confirmed they were content with the minutes. Sue Gray noted that all actions were complete except the action for her to consider the future recording of Board Minutes, which was ongoing.

AMcC confirmed that she had followed up with DfC. PD to follow up on the Digital Skills AP under AOB. Tt confirmed that he had completed Action 7.

3. DoF Business Planning

SB noted that the draft (2020/21) business plan had not yet been discussed and cleared with the Minister with other priorities however the Department does have to report on progress in the annual report. The paper outlines where we are on targets to date.

Action 1 - SF to send business Plan Targets paper to the NEDs

Action 2 - SB to agree re-wording to Priority 10 – People Plan/Strategy

PD suggested that in developing targets for next year's business plan that careful consideration should be given to the wording of the targets, to ensure they properly reflect what is within the Department's ability to deliver. This would also assist in determining the appropriate RAG status.

4. Finance Update

SB noted the Department had just been through the January monitoring process. The Department surrendered £6.1m which included unfilled vacancies, rent and maintenance. There was a reduced requirement of capital amounting to £1.8m. This leaves an underspend of approx. £900-1m in resource and capital more or less on target. The position could change towards the end of the year. There is a lot going on with the local restrictions, £155m allocation for financial assistance scheme bring the budget up to £190m. There is some added head room in the Estimates for additional Covid support if there is underspend in other departments. Potentially the DoF could spend that money and several proposals are under consideration, The Department could still spend more money on local restrictions aspect as there is still money available.

SG reiterated the need to examine workforce plans and see what is affordable and asked for returns to be submitted ASAP.

IS said on a related note that the University of Ulster report on land registry fees was suggesting that the market will drop this year and will gradually increase over the next few years, modest increase no increase in fees in medium to short term. SG said that she intended to write to the PAC to inform them that the level of spend against the NI Direct contract will be greater than previously communicated due to the need to respond to the pandemic. It would also be a useful opportunity to inform them about the fees order.

Action 3 - IS/PD – draft a letter to the PAC to cover both those points.

5. EU Future Relations Update

BP noted the main issue being the Protocol and suggested a change of title for the update.

The issues in the past month have essentially been the outworking's of the protocol. The Executive subcommittee on EU exit met on Tuesday and this item was the only one that led to any discussion. There was debate around whether the Executive should, alongside resolving the Protocol issues, be identifying the opportunities from the Protocol. The view was completely split, the DUP insistent that we are severed from our main market and top priority must be to get unfettered access and that the Government promise is secured i.e. getting rid of the Protocol. Extending the grace period won't help is the position.

In terms of teething issues (per EU), Gove and the Commission did meet and are committed to delivering the Protocol and working to resolve the issues.

DoF have 2 issues. The first on Jill's side i.e. adapting the guidance for nationality requirements for recruitment to the NICS. The second – data adequacy on Paul's side with Igg. There has been significant progress, the Commission have drafted regulations that would recognise UK Data adequacy situation. New regulations are not a vast thing in Brussels but intention is there to have a data adequacy agreement with UK. Which is one off DoF list so good progress.

Protocol issue with us for some time. SG thanked BP and noted it was very helpful

6. Communications Update

People survey issued with the results for DoF towards end of the week, perhaps a more detailed presentation to DB would be useful. DoF saw an 8 percentage point increase in Employee Engagement Index score now at 59%. 57% engagement across NICS – up 6 percentage points on 2019. 60% of staff indicated they would prefer working at home every, or most days.

Increasing online engagement presence, next meeting on Friday on health and wellbeing, opportunity to ask questions. 500-700 colleagues joining in live. 2 in last month, mindfulness, consumer council, domestic violence. Nominations for New Year's honours closing date 9 March, DB members to encourage teams to put people forward.

On the Census, there was a useful session with the Minister. Media arrangements are well underway for Census Day on 21 March.

There is continued media interest in remaining funding to be spent in this financial year. Further allocations planned for this week & next which will require media activity and support.

3 March – UK Budget – will lead to media interest in terms of what this means for NI and any measures which are announced such as extension of furlough, rates holidays.

SG asked MMcL to give a summary position on FOIs & AQs. Performance is good and thanks to teams for support. FOIs are now at 97% so a strong position when it came to the audit, AQs at 95%. Thanks for turnaround from across the Department. DALO leaving on promotion.

7. COVID 19

SG noted that quite a bit had been covered earlier in the meeting. Delivering support across the Department, business support/rates, supplier relief, ITA all playing a big part and a massive thank you. Bill's team on airports and hospices, now overtaken Economy in the amount money issued in terms of support. Thank you to all.

8. HR Update

Joanne Dowling presented the HR Update, giving updates on resources, vacancies, sickness absence rates and temporary promotions. Joanne provided an update on a high level recruitment plan, a review of vacancies, Temporary Promotions, the agency workers contract and annual leave.

JM noted the Talent Management toolkit. Key piece of work which will help support concerns highlighted in the RHI and the NIAO reports. It had been agreed by NICS board and then held off because of COVID. Decision has now been taken to roll out, DB members were asked to bear in mind that it is a valuable development tool, and that it is picked up and actually used.

9. AOB

PD picked up on the action point in relation to Digital skills. Following the presentation last month which was based on the results of a questionnaire across NICS last year, it was agreed to re-run the questionnaire now that people have been working from home for 10 months. The survey has issued within DOF, 800 responses had been received to date. It closes on 8 March so would ask DB members to encourage teams to complete. The evidence from that survey will form the basis for the next presentation and future recommendations.

The intention is to open 10 Connect2 hubs by 2023, with the first 2 opening early this year in Downpatrick and Ballykelly. These will be available to all departments and staff but will not replace individual's permanent place of work. There has been considerable interest from councils and elected representatives.

SG asked if anyone had anything to raise.

SC reminded DB members of the Census, and that advance postcards may have been received. Made the point that you do not have to wait to 21 March to complete and to encourage people to fill in online. MIS provided by Total Mobile, a Belfast company, delivering real time progress, and can be used to tailor fieldwork for specific areas. Advertising started in the TV and billboards etc.

Good luck and huge amount of work from David Marshall and his team.

BP provided an update on the fiscal council. Creating the Fiscal Council was in an NDNA commitment. It is to be an independent Body that will provide independent advice on the sustainability of the Executive Budget. Was to be established within 3 months of Executive being re-established. Making progress now having been delayed with COVID work etc.

People identified to chair, haven't signed yet. Robert Chote (formerly chair of OBR) and Paul Johnson – head of institute for fiscal studies, chair the commission.

The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 31 March 2021. Thanks to all and to the teams.

Seanin Ferguson

Acting Board Secretary