

**Minutes of the
DoF Departmental Board Meeting**

Held Online

Thursday 26th November 2020, 1300

Board Members / Deputies	In Attendance
Sue Gray	Jonathan McNaught (Board Secretary)
Claire Archbold	Anne McCusker (Boardroom Apprentice)
Des Armstrong	
Stewart Barnes	
Siobhan Carey	
Paul Duffy	
Jill Minne	
Joanne McBurney	
Ian Snowden	
Emer Morelli	
Ciarrai Conlan	
John Smyth (NEBM)	
Liz Ensor (NEBM)	

1. Welcome/Apologies

Sue Gray welcomed Members to the meeting, noting apologies from Tom Taylor (NEBM), Bill Pauley (Emer Morelli deputising) and Mark McLaughlin (Ciarrai Conlan deputising).

No conflicts of interest were registered.

2. Minutes and Matters Arising

Members confirmed they were content with the minutes.

On matters arising, Sue noted all had been complete except her decision on the format of Board minutes.

3. Line of Business Systems

Paul Duffy introduced his paper, noting it came from an earlier Board discussion on the corporate risk register in the context of cyber risks. Paul said such risks were for all Directors to consider, not only ESS. He confirmed that ESS though, through IT Assist, have a number of mitigation measures in place and that systems generally had security controls inbuilt.

Paul also updated the Board on the recruitment of a Chief Information Security Officer, Ray Murray, and the implementation of a new Incident Monitoring System across the NICS. That system will allow us to learn lessons and to monitor activity across the network, providing early warning of unusual or suspicious activity. In addition, Paul reminded Members of the availability of cyber awareness training on LINKS, noting 200 staff in DoF had undertaken it already and that DfC were planning to take 500 staff through it in the New Year. John Smyth congratulated Paul on the introduction of the training, with Paul confirming there are 2 levels of courses, one for most staff that takes 30 minutes and one for Board Members, the time commitment for which is being agreed.

In conclusion, Paul recommended the risk register (risk 4) be updated to refer to all line of business systems. Paul also asked Directors to ensure they get appropriate assurance within their respective business areas on the systems used there.

Siobhan Carey said she hoped she had sight of all systems in NISRA but would appreciate it if Paul could provide a list for information. Des Armstrong welcomed the Board paper and agreed that the sharing of a systems list with Directors would be a positive move. Paul Duffy agreed to send a list to all Directors.

Action Point: Paul Duffy to provide Directors with a list of IT systems within the Department.

Liz Ensor asked how the Department monitors 3rd party suppliers. Paul said they had a contractual obligation to ensure security of information and their systems, and contract managers ensure that obligation is met, but that the Department also has accreditation processes that focus on security.

4. Finance Update

Sue Gray said the Chancellor's Spending Review had set a clear tone, that it wasn't good news for the NICS and DoF, and tough decisions lay ahead.

Stewart Barnes reminded Members we were in the middle of January monitoring, saying that although his update paper identified resource easements of c.£4.6m, mainly due to vacancies not being filled and a delay in maintenance of buildings, however we were likely to face costs of c.£1.5m on annual leave carryover and £1.5m exit costs from an ESS contract (identified this morning). As this was a fluid situation, Stewart asked that Directors continue to carefully monitor spending in their area and engage Finance Division at the earliest opportunity. In terms of capital, Stewart said we are likely to have an easement of c.£2-3m due to project slippage.

Sue Gray reiterated Stewart's request to carefully manage our budgets so that we can identify resource that can be used by other Departments. Sue said the

Minister was fully involved in this process and that we needed to stress test any future spending.

Stewart reflected on the Spending Review outcome, saying we would need to live within our existing baseline. He recalled the exercise undertaken in September that had identified pressures of c.£21m, c.£9m of which is expected to arise from a reduction in Land Registry income after a revised Fees Order is passed. We had asked Directors to absorb the remaining c.£12m, however we are potentially looking at a 5.5% cut in our resource budget and we need to agree how we can live within that revised budget. Stewart though reminded Members the DoF budget consists of 90% staff costs and the room for manoeuvre is restricted.

Joanne McBurney echoed Stewart and Sue's reflection of the Spending Review, noting the extra £416m announced for NI resource DEL was in effect a 'standing still' position. It is likely that the Executive will take the same approach as this year to the e additional Covid-19 resources, c.£538m, which would see them used for Covid related costs only. Sue thought we might be able to associate some of our spending with Covid-19, however there would still be pain overall. She said we should stop doing work that isn't critical and that there is a need to liaise with NICS HR on recruitment and selection. The Executive would be taking an overall view of the position.

Liz Ensor asked if the carryover of annual leave was contractual. Sue confirmed there was a contractual entitlement to carry over up to 9 days untaken annual leave but the issue was more that large numbers of staff would seek to carry over more than 9 days, which we couldn't afford. Joanne Dowling said the latest figures available that annual leave uptake in DoF is 28% less this year than it was at this point last year.

Claire Archbold asked if there was any change to the funding relevant to the NI Protocol; Joanne McBurney said there hadn't at this stage.

Sue said the Treasury had indicated it was now keeping control of the Shared Prosperity Fund, that the devolved nations and regions would need to engage with HMT to access funding. This was a big change from the approach used for the EU Structural Funds and the adjustment would present a challenge for all affected by it.

5. BREXIT and Operational Readiness

Emer Morelli confirmed that trade negotiations are ongoing and that the Prime Minister is likely to become involved soon, which raises hopes a deal is possible. On operational readiness, Emer said all Directorates should have planning assumptions, and that they should refer to these in answering Bill Pauley's request from this morning in terms of contingency planning, which needs to go back to TEO next Wednesday.

Emer noted the Day 1 issues for DoF are recorded as data, procurement and vulnerable people. EU Division are available for Directors should they need assistance in completing their returns. Claire Archbold said we continue to focus on working to link plans across NICS to ensure they are in support of each other. Des Armstrong said the procurement issue could either be described as a trade issue or a procurement issue, giving the example of the construction industry and North/South thresholds. Des has asked DfE for clarity, which will help in deciding where that issue best sits in the Department.

John Smyth noted there are 35 days until the end of the transition period, and still a need to get any deal through 27 Member parliaments, the EU parliament and Westminster. He wondered if there will be an extension of the transition period to allow that to happen, though Sue reminded the meeting that the Prime Minister has consistently rules out any extension. She also thought the Prime Minister would only become involved with negotiations if a deal was agreed in principle.

6. Communications Update

Ciarrai Conlan updated Members:

- the staff engagement event on Tuesday, which focussed on Covid-19, had attracted 573 participants; more events are planned;
- the 2020 People Survey had launched this week, to run until mid-December. Over 640 DoF staff had completed the survey so far, a slight increase on last year's completion rate at the same stage;
- discussions are underway to hold NICS awards in 2021;
- there will be a series of Webinars throughout December;
- Private Office continues to be very busy, Directors are reminded about deadlines and the need to use the templates on the Intranet. Divisional mailboxes are now being used to shorten distribution lists;
- there are currently 354 FoI requests in process and 1 internal review;
- the media focus has recently been on the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme. The Comms Team are working with LPS, noting more businesses will be eligible for the scheme tomorrow, and that a new webpage will be available to help those businesses provide information in the correct manner.

Sue Gray said the People Survey was very important. She said the Inter Departmental Working Group had done a very good job in agreeing key questions and Directors should be encouraging their teams to complete the survey.

7. HR Update

Joanne Dowling asked Members to note the following issues detailed in her update paper:

- there are 316 staff on temporary promotion as of 2nd November, with 123 of them over 12 months. In light of the anticipated supply across key general service grades, Directors were asked to undertake a review of these to ensure there continues to be a robust business case. Sue Gray said she had some discussions with Directors and asked for plans to be developed to end the TPs, noting she had come across one case where a member of staff had been on TP for 12/13 years. Joanne and Sue are due to meet on 14th December to discuss these, so the outcome of Director's reviews should be available to inform the discussion. Business partners can support Directors with detailed information, if needed;
- agency worker breakdown had been provided by e.mail and Joanne highlighted that we have over 48 who have been in the Department for more than 2 years. Directors were asked to also arrange for a review of the continued use of agency workers, particularly those in the NICS for extended periods and at AO level, where there is now a corporate supply available;
- Directors were asked to continue to reinforce the need to take annual leave;
- 56% of DoF staff have registered on the KIT app as of 2nd November. Unfortunately this means we can't rely on the app to answer queries, AQWs etc. Joanne asked Directors to encourage their teams to use the app;
- 49% of mid-year reviews had been recorded on HR Connect, need a higher rate than this;
- Learning and Development colleagues are working on revised induction to take account of staff and managers working from home and managing probation periods, including e-learning;
- talent management information will be circulated shortly; and
- the GDPR action point from the October meeting regarding the NISRA competition has been resolved and tests are planned for 14th December

Stewart Barnes asked if the KIT app could be linked with staff logging onto their system. Sue Gray said lots of work was being done by the Behavioural Insights Team and that we needed this to be a success. Paul Duffy said he thought the main challenge for the app is to let staff see its benefits and that he struggles to see how we can drive up usage without it being mandatory. Paul thought we should look at that, even just in DoF.

Sue noted the Chancellor's Spending Review meant a freeze on public sector pay and that she didn't see any room for flexibility, and we couldn't afford it in any event. Sue asked Jill Minne to update the Board on the current year negotiations. Jill said there had been 2 meetings with TUS following an offer of 1%. Sue had also written to Permanent Secretary colleagues seeking their input to identifying efficiencies that might be realised to permit something above 1%. TUS were disappointed with the offer, though they did record their understanding of the tough economic situation at the moment due to Covid-19. They did highlight that other organisations were in receipt of higher offers, for example in the NI Audit Office, the Assembly, DWP and across local Government. We want to look at wider reform of terms and conditions, for example on family leave provisions and the Minister is keen that the NICS becomes a Living Wage employer. NICS HR have had an initial look at

efficiencies and are working with SPAR to cost them, however it will be important for Permanent Secretaries to input.

Liz Ensor asked about the Living Wage and what work was being done to narrow the differential. Jill said that some staff had contractual hours of 42 per week and some had 37 hours per week. The first step is to harmonise these; for example if we use the 37 hours figure we would already meet the Living Wage, though there would be an increased cost to NICS in terms of overtime. It also goes further with a commitment for contracts to permit Living Wage terms.

8. Car Parking

Sue Gray confirmed to Members that the leasing of car parking spaces in Belfast City Centre would end on 30th November. The decision had been taken partly due to expense but also due to leading by example and reducing the flow of traffic into the city centre and the environmental impact that has. She gave credit to Desi McDonnell and his team on their work to identify what this means for the Department, which was likely to be a prioritisation of spaces for those with disabilities. We do though need some interim arrangement whilst many staff are working from home; the presumption however is that there is no entitlement to a space but we will consider applications.

Sue said we had explored the extension of the leases for a short time but the companies weren't favourable. This is now an urgent exercise but Sue noted those who need to use their car for work are entitled to claim expenses. Whilst this would cause some pain, initially with those staff in the city centre, Sue confirmed this would eventually be NICS wide and there is Executive approval of the move. Sue said we would review the position in January but that any interim arrangement should end in March.

9. Covid-19

Sue Gray thanked Directors and their teams for continuing to do an amazing job at this time. She noted more than 100 LPS staff were working 7 days a week to implement and deliver schemes the Executive were agreeing to, even if that needed some working out at times. This is far from normal business and now we have to contend with further restrictions that are similar to those in March and April, which meant we should only have key staff in the office.

Ian Snowden said the difficulty for LPS is how the Executive's decisions play out, for example the scheme originally put in place to support 400 hospitality businesses in 1 council area is now being used to support up to 20,000 businesses in all parts of Northern Ireland. The rapid changes in the restrictions, often announced with 24 hours' notice, as well as uncertainty about the details of the restrictions (for example, the position on whether toy shops were required to close had changed since the Executive's announcement) made delivery very challenging. LPS had hoped to use an automated system but the data being provided by other public sector organisations and the

applicants themselves has not been good. For example, 89 applicants to the scheme had not provided the correct details for the bank account that the money was to be paid into and approximately 2,000 applicants had made errors in their address details. Ian also said there had been a four-fold increase in the amount of correspondence LPS is dealing with. Staff are getting tired, therefore he had decided to use the need to take the rating system offline for some maintenance work to ensure there would be no overtime worked this weekend. He also said that to prepare the grant application system for the non-essential retail application he needed to close the portal to applications over the weekend. Sue Gray said she needed to discuss that with Ian.

Sue Gray also thanked Paul Duffy and his teams. She noted too the Private Office were trying to stop the number of AQs etc. going to the Department, recognising the pressures they added to ongoing delivery at this time. The Minister was fully aware of the situation.

Claire Archbold said she had seen a little of LPS' work and that she wanted to give a shout out to David Hughes and Eugene O'Loan who are both in DoH drafting the necessary Regulations to give effect to the measures agreed by the Executive. This is often a very difficult task. Sue Gray agreed, using the Derry and Strabane restrictions as an example, Escape Rooms were to close under them but when the restrictions came to be wider than that area, those facilities weren't in the new Regulations. She also noted that David Hughes had been in the Assembly until 2am one night this week for Jim Allister MLA's Bill, and that DfE colleagues were taking on new schemes this week (voucher scheme) on top of everything else.

10. AOB

Liz Ensor and Anne McCusker updated the Board on their attendance at the recent Governance and Leadership Conference. Liz said it was very good and that the quality of speakers was high, possibly helped by the online nature of the conference. Anne agreed, also noting it was a very interactive experience. Sue Gray likened it to our recent DoF staff engagement sessions, of which more are to come.

Siobhan Carey informed the Board that NISRA had 2 of its 4 nominations shortlisted for the Analysis in Government Awards. The winners in each category will be announced on Dec 8th.

The next meeting is scheduled for Monday 14th December 2020.

Jonathan McNaught
Board Secretary