DoF Departmental Board Meeting  
The Board Room, Clare House  

30 January 2017, 10.30am – 1.00pm  

Minutes  

Departmental Board Members | In Attendance  
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David Sterling | Martin Monaghan (minutes)  
Des Armstrong | Anne Armstrong  
Mike Brennan | Desi McDonnell  
Siobhan Carey |  
Colin Sullivan |  
Brigitte Worth |  
Anne Breen |  
Colin Lewis |  
Colum Boyle |  
Hugh Widdis |  
Stephen Hodkinson |  
Dolores O’Reilly |  

1. **Welcome/Apologies**  
David Sterling welcomed Members to the meeting. He advised that Paul Wickens had sent his apologies and that Desi McDonnell was deputising for him. He also noted that Stephen Hodkinson would join the meeting shortly and that Colum Boyle would have to leave at 12.00pm.  

No conflicts of interest were registered.  

2. **Minutes from Previous Meeting/Matters Arising**  
The minutes of the meeting on 5 December 2016 were agreed.  

Board Members noted progress against the action points from the previous meeting. Dolores O’Reilly asked if she could receive an update on the Irish Language Action Plan. Martin Monaghan agreed to forward details to her.  

**Action: M Monaghan**  

3. **DoF Corporate Performance Report – Quarter 3, 2016/17**  
Brigitte Worth referred Members to the Corporate Performance Report, which detailed progress in relation to the 20 Departmental targets for 2016-17 to the end of December 2016.  

Members discussed the targets and noted that the status of a number of these had moved to red in recent weeks due to the current political situation. This
included the targets for Executive agreement of spending plans and preparations for the devolution of Corporation Tax. Desi McDonnell also noted that due to the uncertainty around the budget position, the risk associated with the Reform of Property Management had materialised and the project was now proceeding ‘at risk’.

The status and ratings of the other risks on the Corporate Risk Register were reviewed and discussed. Board Members proposed amendments to the wording and ratings of some of these risks and it was agreed that these would be processed as part of the Quarter 4 update.

**Action: DB Members**

Brigitte provided an update on the latest financial position within the Department. She advised that the Department had identified £12.9m of reduced requirements in current expenditure during the January Monitoring process. She noted that this was an unusually large surrender and was particularly notable, given the reductions imposed on opening baselines.

Board Members discussed the reduced requirements and noted that a large proportion was due to extreme and uncontrollable factors e.g. the inability to start new projects when ongoing funding was uncertain, the restrictions on discretionary spend and the adjustments to salary costs post VES. They discussed the proposal to re-introduce a Departmental underspend target and agreed that this should be considered for the new financial year.

Brigitte asked Directors to keep a close focus on budget forecasts for the remainder of the financial year and to inform Finance Division of any emerging issues.

**Action: DB Members**

Anne Breen referred Members to the Workforce Planning tables and the Sick Absence Compliance statistics. She noted that the changes in workforce numbers across the Department were stabilising, as a more settled structure was established following VES. Anne noted that the number of temporary promotions remained high and Board Members agreed that this should be addressed through the use of promotion lists and recruitment competitions.

Anne also highlighted the Sick Absence Compliance statistics for the Department. She noted that there had been some improvement in the ‘Certification’ and ‘Return to Work Interview’ figures during the quarter, but that there was still room for improvement. Board Members discussed reasons for the variation in performance by business area and agreed to work with their HR Business Partners to improve compliance across the Department.

4. **Departmental Financial Planning**

Brigitte Worth referred Members to the financial planning paper, which had been produced in the absence of an agreed budget position for 2017-18. She
highlighted various scenarios for the Department on the assumption that there would be a 5% cut to the current expenditure budget and that capital spending would be constrained to contractual commitments and essential spending only. She outlined the impact on baseline allocations for each business area and asked Directors to produce forecasts on the basis of these estimates and highlight any uncontrollable pressures. Brigitte also noted differences in the income forecasts for 2017-18 compared to the current year, and asked Directors to ensure that forecasts are realistic and that all potential income is pursued.

Action: DB Members

Brigitte outlined the projects for which the Department had submitted bids during the 2017-18 budget exercise and Board Members discussed the way forward with these, given that budget allocations had not been made. It was agreed that the Rate Rebate Replacement Programme and Census 2021 projects were unavoidable and funding should be found internally to continue with these projects. Likewise, it was agreed that the Civil Law Reform Division and Register of Managing Agents projects should continue, given the relatively small amount of funding required.

However, funding was not available to cover the other proposals and it was agreed that these projects may have to be either paused or proceed at risk. Brigitte agreed to meet separately with Directors to discuss the impact of this and provide a further paper outlining the issues in more detail.

Action: B Worth

Brigitte also referred Members to the Department’s capital expenditure plans for 2017-18, which were categorised into contractual commitments, essential and desirable expenditure. Members discussed the capital plans for the year ahead and the process for taking forward capital projects in the absence of an agreed budget.

5. Sick Absence Trends

Anne Breen advised that the Department’s absence figures for April to December 2016 equated to 7.2 days absence per staff year equivalent, which was lower than the equivalent NICS figure (9.3 days). The Department’s projected figure for days lost in this financial year is 9.7 days, which is marginally lower than last year’s figure (9.8 days). Anne noted that there had been a slight reduction in the overall number of long-term absence cases when compared to this time last year and suggested that this may be attributable to the introduction of Stress Intervention interviews for DoF staff.

Board Members discussed the information provided and David Sterling asked how the long-term absence figures compared with the previous trends over time. Anne agreed to look at the statistics and provide further information to the Board.

Action: A Breen
6. **NICS Live 2017 Progress to Date and Way Forward**

Colin Sullivan advised that NICS Live 2017 will be held at the Waterfront, Belfast on 24 May 2017 and outlined progress to date for the event. He added that the NICS Awards ceremony is scheduled to be held on 18 May and it is proposed to link these two flagship events with a NICS Staff Engagement Week.

Colin outlined the themes, subthemes and activities associated with the event and thanked Board Members for their input and ideas to date. He noted that most SCS staff would be expected to participate at the NICS Live event, through involvement in presentations or via the mentoring programme.

7. **NICS Awards 2017 – Progress to Date and Way Forward**

Colin Sullivan advised that the Finance Minister and HOCS had endorsed the 2017 NICS Awards and work was progressing to gather nominations. He noted that two additional categories had been added to this year’s programme (i.e. ‘Diversity & Inclusion’ and ‘Special Recognition’) and that a similar process to last year would be used to assess and judge the nominations. He asked Members to publicise the awards in their areas and encourage staff to put forward nominations.

**Action: DB Members**

8. **Strategic Issues – Leadership challenges for the Department during the next 12 months**

David Sterling summarised the current challenges facing the Department and the wider NICS. These included the current political uncertainty; the lack of an agreed budget and capital spending plan; the absence of a Rates Order; the triggering of Article 50 and subsequent negotiations; and the reputational damage to the NICS resulting from the RHI scheme. He asked Members to consider and discuss how leaders within the Department could respond to the various challenges faced.

Board Members noted the detrimental impact on staff morale that the political uncertainty was causing and discussed ways to improve the public perception of civil servants. They stressed the importance of good staff engagement during this challenging period and the need to reassure staff that contingencies are being put in place. They also noted that for most staff the main elements of their job will not change significantly and the focus should remain on delivering services to highest standard we can.

David sterling agreed to write an article for the next Staff Brief outlining the current situation and providing information on the proposed way forward.

**Action: D Sterling**
9. **Corporate Services – Future Delivery**

Anne Breen provided Members with information on the Corporate Service functions that will remain within DoF following the implementation of NICS HR. She advised that these functions would need to be reallocated among business areas, as the Grade 5 post in Corporate Services would no longer exist following NICS HR.

Board Members discussed the options and agreed that Central Support Team (including Private Office and Assembly Section) and the Press Office would move to Finance Division and that this Division would be renamed Finance and Corporate Services. It was also agreed that Information Systems Branch would move to ESS in anticipation of the ICT centralisation project.

It was also agreed that a sub-group of the Board would meet separately to discuss in detail the issues around the other functions and decide upon the most appropriate way forward.

**Action: D Sterling**

10. **PSG Update**

David Sterling provided feedback from the most recent PSG meeting.

11. **Communications Update – Media Analysis**

Anne Armstrong reminded Members of the importance of adhering to the pre-election guidance that had recently issued to NICS staff.

12. **DARC Minutes – Sept 2016**

Board Members noted the Departmental Audit & Risk Committee minutes.

13. **Fraud and Whistleblowing Report – Dec 2016**

Board Members noted the Fraud and Whistleblowing Report.

14. **Staff Brief Articles**

Board Members noted and agreed the proposed articles for the next Staff Brief.

**MARTIN MONAGHAN**
6 February 2017