

Minutes of the Finance and Personnel Committee meeting held on 1 September 2020 at 10.00am by videoconference

Present: Albert Mills (Chair)
Michelle McGinley
Gary McMichael

In attendance: Tom Evans (Chief Executive)
Don Leeson (Director of Corporate Services)
Angela Bryans (HR Manager)
Ciaran Canning (Executive Officer) – agenda items 1-3
Claire Kilpatrick (HR Manager)
Sarah Livingstone (Board Apprentice)
Mary O'Brien (Business Support Manager)

The Chair welcomed Ciaran Canning and Sarah Livingstone their first meeting of the Committee. Ciaran was attending on behalf of the Employment Relations Group's Reward and Recognition sub-group (agenda item 3), and Sarah is the Agency's new Board Apprentice under the Strictly Boardroom programme, starting on 1 September 2020.

Declarations of Interest: no conflicts of interest were declared.

1. Minutes of the Last Meeting

1.1 The minutes of the Finance and Personnel Committee meeting held on 2 June 2020 (paper FP 01 09/20 refers) were agreed as an accurate record.

2. Matters Arising from the Last Meeting

2.1 The Director of Corporate Services reported that the Head Office Rent Review has been settled (paragraph 3.2 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). The Agency had challenged the increase on the basis that Covid-19 was likely to have depressed rents. However, Land and Property Services (LPS) advised that Covid-19 did not impact on the Rent Review as it applied to market conditions in June 2019; they also provided evidence that the increase was in keeping with rent levels in comparative properties. The Committee noted that, given LPS's advice, the Agency has reluctantly accepted the outcome of the Rent Review. Subsequently, the Agency submitted a business case for DfE's approval of the revised rent, which was granted. The increased rent is now being paid and the Agency is seeking additional funding from DfE to cover the costs of this.

2.2 The Committee noted that extension of the current IS Managed Services contract has been approved by CPD and DfE (paragraph 5.3 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). This provides continuity of service until the Agency relocates to James House, when new arrangements will be needed. On CPD's advice, an option to further extend the contract for one year beyond the planned relocation date of 2022 is being provided for. CPD are currently progressing the contract extension.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

2.3 The Director of Corporate Services reported that RNIB has reviewed the website and confirmed that it is accessible to visually impaired users (paragraph 6.4 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

2.4 The Committee noted that the results of the survey to assess awareness of the Agency's services were tabled at the June 2020 Board meeting (paragraph 6.9 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

2.5 All other outstanding actions from the last meeting are dealt with under the relevant substantive agenda item.

3. Reward and Recognition – proposals from the Employment Relations Group sub-group

3.1 A representative of the Employment Relations Group (ERG) sub-group of staff from across the Agency, which had been tasked with considering how achievements might be better recognised and rewarded, presented a range of proposals to the Committee (paper FP 02 09/20 refers). The proposals include the possible use of gift vouchers and time off to recognise achievements and service, as well as staff awards.

3.2 The Committee expressed their appreciation for the significant work the sub-group has undertaken in developing such a comprehensive set of proposals.

3.3 The Committee asked the Chief Executive to consider whether the proposals are permissible within NICS rules. Proposals will then be presented to the Board for approval.

Action: Chief Executive

4. Finance Matters

Update on 2020-21 financial position

4.1 The Committee noted the Agency's financial position is unchanged from that reported in the Management Accounts for the period ended 31 July 2020, which were presented to the August Board meeting.

Update on Spending Review (2021-24)

4.2 The Director of Corporate Services reported that the Agency has made its submission to the NI Executive's Spending Review. This exercise will set resource budgets for the next three financial years (i.e. to 2023-24) and capital budgets for the next four financial years (i.e. to 2024-25). The Agency is seeking the funding it has been relying on through in-year bids to be added to its budget baseline to enable more effective longer term financial planning. Funding for non-recurrent financial commitments, such as the employment relations conference in 2021 and those associated with Head Office relocation in 2022, is also being sought. The Committee will be kept informed of progress.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

5. HR Matters

Progress against HR Work Plan for 2020-21

5.1 The HR Managers presented an update on current activities. The Committee noted that, as well as a continued focus on staff health and wellbeing during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the recent priority has been to review and update the Agency's HR policies.

5.2 The Committee noted that the streamlining of the performance appraisal process, which concluded during the summer, has been particularly valuable and appreciated by staff this year, given remote working arrangements. However, there has been feedback from line managers about the usability of the online HR management system. The HR Team is looking at how this issue might be overcome for the forthcoming mid-year review process.

Action: HR Managers

HR Metrics – FP 03 09/20

5.3 The Committee noted the HR Metrics report and welcomed the additional information provided in it regarding the profile of the Agency's workforce (paper FP 03 09/20 refers).

Recruitment Report for 2019

5.4 The Committee noted the report on the Agency's recruitment exercises in 2019 (paper FP 04 09/20 refers).

5.5 The report contained a number of recommendations aimed at increasing the diversity of the Agency's workforce through future recruitment exercises. These were endorsed by the Committee.

Action: HR Managers

- 5.6 The Committee also agreed a proposal to seek to establish a Diversity Champion from among Board or SMT members.

Action: Chief Executive

Update on the work of the Employment Relations Group

- 5.7 The Committee noted that the ERG is functioning well and has established a number of sub-groups to progress Covid-19 safety measures for the Agency's offices, design and relocation planning for James House, and intranet development, as well as reward and recognition (above). A Social Committee, under the auspices of the ERG, is also being set up.

'You Said / We Did' – report on response to Covid-19 Staff Survey

- 5.8 The Committee noted a feedback report to staff, 'You Said / We Did', on the actions taken by the Agency in response to Covid-19 Staff Survey (paper FP 05 09/20 refers).
- 5.9 The Committee noted that this report has recently been supplemented by a 'question and answer' brief clarifying policy changes aimed at supporting staff to better manage their work/life balance while working remotely.
- 5.10 Committee members reiterated their appreciation of the work of the HR Team during this difficult time for staff, which had been given at the last meeting.

Disability Action Plan

- 5.11 The Committee noted that finalisation of the Disability Action Plan (FP 06 09/20) had been delayed while public consultation responses had been analysed and taken into account. The plan will be circulated to Committee members for review by correspondence, following the meeting.

Action: HR Managers

6. ICT Matters

IS Plan for 2020-21

- 6.1 The IT Manager presented the IS Plan for 2020-21 (paper FP 07-09/20 refers). It was noted this implements the final year of the Agency's IS Strategy.
- 6.2 The Committee noted that the key priorities for the year include facilitating effective remote working by Agency staff during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, identifying a suitable videoconferencing platform(s) for the delivery of the Agency's services, reviewing the longer term support arrangements for the case management system (CMRS), and assessing the options for the Agency's IS managed services following relocation to James House.

6.3 The IS Plan for 2020-21 was agreed.

Update on CMRS Phase 3 Project

6.4 The IT Manager reported that the CMRS Phase 3 enhancements are on track to be delivered for user acceptance testing in September 2020.

Action: IT Manager

6.5 The Committee noted that there had been further difficulties with regard to turnover among the contractor's workforce, and the retention of knowledge about CMRS, but this is being managed.

7. Communications Matters

7.1 The Director of Corporate Services presented the Communications Plan for 2020-21 (paper FP 08-09/20 refers). It was noted this implements the final year of the Agency's Communications Strategy.

7.2 The Committee noted that the Communications Manager is now in the final year of her three-year inward secondment, which is due to end on 31 July 2021. The Director of Corporate Services reported that the Agency is seeking funding for a permanent post as part of the Spending Review (paragraph 4.2 above refers). Committee members agreed that this is now a key role within the Agency.

7.3 The Communications Plan for 2020-21 was agreed.

8. Business Support Matters

Re-opening the Agency's offices - next steps

8.1 The Director of Corporate Services updated the Committee on the Covid-19 safety measures being implemented to enable the Agency's Head Office to re-open in early October 2020, which were presented to the August Board meeting. The critical role being played by the Business Support Team in making the preparations was noted.

8.2 The Committee noted the extensive level of engagement regarding this matter with the Trade Union Side and ERG sub-group. The valuable input from the union's Health and Safety Representative was also noted.

8.3 The Committee noted a report on progress in implementing the safety measures will be made to the September Board meeting, and consideration of the prevailing public health situation will be given, before a final decision is taken to re-open Head Office.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

8.4 It was also noted that the Regional Office is unlikely to re-open until early 2021. Discussions with the Regional Manager and the Health and Safety Representative to consider appropriate safety measures are scheduled for early October 2020, after Head Office has re-opened.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

Update on Customer Service Excellence matters

8.5 The Business Support Manager reported on the positive outcome of 'mystery shopping' calls made to the Workplace Information Service. The Committee noted that such calls are an important element of the Customer Service Excellence standard and are continuing, with coverage extended to other parts of the Agency where this approach is appropriate.

Update on OBA measures

8.6 The Business Support Manager reported that statisticians from NISRA have reviewed the Agency's approach to outcomes-based accountability (OBA) measures. The feedback is due to be considered by the Senior Leadership Team at the end of September 2020.

Action: Business Support Manager/SLT

Update on Official Statistics

8.7 The Business Support Manager reported that conciliation statistics from 2019-20 and the first quarter of 2020-21 have been published on the Statistics Hub on the Agency's website. An article is being prepared to promote the availability of the statistics.

Action: Business Support Manager

8.8 A meeting has been scheduled with NISRA in October 2020 to discuss the Agency becoming formally designated as a provider of official statistics.

Action: Business Support Manager

9. Any Other Business

9.1 The Committee requested that abbreviations used in papers be explained.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

9.2 The Board Apprentice thanked the Committee for allowing her to attend the meeting. She offered her assistance in identifying ways in which the Agency might better connect with younger people as part of its communications strategy. A meeting will be arranged with the Communications Manager to discuss this.

Action: Director of Corporate Services/Communications Manager

10. Date of Next Meeting

10.1 The next meeting will be on 1 December 2020.