

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

Present: Albert Mills (Chair)
Michelle McGinley
Gary McMichael

In attendance: Don Leeson (Chief Executive)
Angela Bryans (HR Manager)
Paul Herink (IT Manager)
Claire Kilpatrick (HR Manager)
Paul Lowe (Interim Director of Corporate Services)
Mary O'Brien (Business Support Manager)
Alison Wolfe (Minute Secretary)

Apologies: Keelin Kelly (Communications Manager), Sarah Livingstone (Board Apprentice)

Declarations of Interest: no conflicts of interest were declared.

The Chair welcomed Alison Wolfe and Paul Lowe to their first Committee meeting and also Don Leeson who was attending for the first time in his new capacity as the Agency Chief Executive.

1. Minutes of the Last Meeting

1.1 The minutes of the Finance and Personnel Committee meeting held on 1 September 2020 (paper FP0-12/20 refers) were agreed as an accurate record.

2. Matters Arising from the Last Meeting

2.1 The Chief Executive reported that the extension to the current IS Managed Services Contract has now been signed (paragraph 2.2 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). The extension covers the period through to relocation to James House in 2022, with an option to further extend the contract if this is delayed.

2.2 The Committee approved a proposal to identify two people to become Diversity Champions; one at Board level who would mentor a staff member (paragraph 5.6 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). The staff member would become an expert in anti-discrimination, follow case law and policy developments, and share knowledge with staff. They might also champion relevant issues that Agency staff might wish to promote inside and outside of the workplace. The Board will be invited to nominate a Diversity Champion.

Action: Committee Chair

- 2.3 Disability Action Plan has now been agreed and is being implemented (paragraph 5.11 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).
- 2.4 Covid-19 safety measures are in place (paragraphs 8.3 and 8.4 of the minutes of the last meeting refer). However, given the prevailing public health situation, the Agency's offices are unlikely to re-open to the public before the Spring. Measures are in place to allow a small number of staff access to Head Office under strict controls.
- 2.5 The authors of papers have been reminded of the need to explain acronyms and abbreviations (paragraph 9.1 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).
- 2.6 The Board Apprentice has provided helpful advice to the Communications Manager regarding setting up an Instagram account as a means of better connecting with young people (paragraph 9.2 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

3. Finance Matters

Update on 2020-21 financial position

- 3.1 The Chief Executive reported that the Agency has secured an additional £440k following the outcome of October Monitoring. A revised budget was approved at the October 2020 Board meeting.
- 3.2 The additional funding included provision for overtime working to grow capacity to respond to increased demand for services. The increased health and wellbeing risk this brings, particularly when working from home, was noted.

Outlook for 2021-22)

- 3.3 The Chief Executive reported that the three-year spending review, to which the Agency had submitted a bid for funding, was changed by HM Treasury to a one year review due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The Agency's bid for £900k for 2021-22 was resubmitted in November 2020. This is to make current temporary staffing arrangements permanent. The bid also includes funding to cover additional Head Office rent and the Agency's liability for dilapidations, which will need to be accounted for 2021-22.

4. HR Matters

Progress against HR Work Plan for 2020-21

4.1 The HR Managers provided an update on current activities. The work plan for 2020-21 is currently on track.

HR Metrics

4.2 The Committee noted the HR Metrics (paper FP 02 12/20 refers).

4.3 The Committee noted the low level of sick absence and discussed the heightened risk of 'presenteeism', given that staff are working from home. It was noted line managers have been reminded to ensure staff are not continuing to work if sick.

Health & Wellbeing

4.4 The HR Managers reported on the summary of health and wellbeing activities throughout the year (paper FP03-12/20 refers).

4.5 HR continues to hold regular 'Ask/Tell HR' sessions to make sure the necessary support is provided for staff; this is also an opportunity to provide clarity around policies. To address challenges faced by those staff with caring responsibilities a focus group for Working Parents has been established and has proved worthwhile.

4.6 The Agency has been particularly active in its corporate social responsibility during Covid-19. Donations to the Agency's Charity Partner 'The Cancer Fund for Children' have almost reached the target of £3k through various staff fundraising activities linked to health and wellbeing. The Social Committee is planning further activities in the run-up to Christmas.

4.7 The HR Managers reported that an action plan will be put in place following a recent 'Work Well/Live Well' survey of staff, which was conducted by Chest Heart and Stroke.

Action: HR Managers

4.8 The Committee noted a proposal to change the focus of the Health and Safety Committee to health and wellbeing issues. This might usefully include a representative from the Agency's network of Mental Health First Aiders.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

4.9 Further initiatives are planned, including lunchtime sessions with motivational speakers for staff on areas linked to health and wellbeing.

Update on the work of the Employment Relations Group (ERG)

4.10 The Committee noted that the ERG continues to meet regularly. The discussions at the last meeting focused on health and wellbeing.

Recognition and Reward

4.11 The Committee noted that the Board had asked for clarification as to whether initial proposals that emanated from the ERG's Reward and Recognition sub group were consistent with NICS governance arrangements. The Chief Executive reported on discussions and correspondence with NICS HR regarding approaches taken by Government Departments to reward schemes. These are based on the Special Bonus Scheme. This allows 0.2% of paybill to be used for reward purposes, such as bonus payments or vouchers. In the Agency's case, this would typically make £5k available for a reward scheme. The Chief Executive commented that bonus payments would not sit well with the Agency's culture; reward vouchers may offer more fruitful angle.

4.12 The HR Managers outlined the proposals regarding recognition and reward (paper FP04-12/20 refers). The Committee noted that the title had been reversed to put added emphasis on recognition, given constraints regarding reward.

4.13 The paper outlined how formal and informal recognition would be granted, with a focus on building a recognition culture. This would include managers and peers sharing customer feedback that identifies particular staff members. In parallel, a reward process linked to demonstration of the Agency's values would be developed. This would involve peer nominations where colleagues are put forward for awards in categories linked to the values. These awards might be quarterly, leading up to annual awards.

Action: Committee Chair/Chief Executive

4.14 It was agreed to seek Board endorsement of the outline approach, so that a detailed scheme can be developed.

5. ICT Matters

Progress against IS Plan for 2020-21

5.1 The IT Manager provided an update of progress against the IS Plan for 2020-21. Regular monthly meetings with service providers have continued in order to address problems speedily and effectively. The IT Manager praised the contributions made by CDW staff who provide the Agency's IT Managed Services and have helped ensure effective remote working by staff throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

- 5.2 A new mobile phone contract has been procured, which will involve an upgrade to the current phones. This provides the capability to manage phone updates centrally, to roll out apps, and resolve problems remotely. The mobile phone infrastructure will also be used to integrate other services i.e. to access the internal phone system.
- 5.3 The IT Manager has undertaken a review of video conferencing options. He will be undertaking a proof of concept exercise of the preferred options to test their applicability to the Agency's requirements.
- 5.4 The annual audit of the Agency's accreditation against the information security management standard, ISO 27001, scheduled for 22/23 December 2020. Given Covid-19 restrictions, this will be conducted virtually and will not involve staff interviews on this occasion.

Update on CMRS Phase 3 Project

- 5.5 The IT Manager reported user acceptance testing of Early Conciliation portal enhancements will commence shortly. However, these do not address a critical problem regarding access for representatives to the portal. The Agency is awaiting a revised proposal from the contractor regarding how it proposes to address this issue. The IT Manager reported that the initial proposal was flawed. It is anticipated that this work, if the proposals and costs are acceptable, will commence early in New Year.

Action: IT Manager

- 5.6 Committee members expressed concern that this issue may cause reputational damage to the Agency and asked if information could be displayed on the website to direct representatives elsewhere. It was noted that guidance on the portal provides a telephone number to raise issues with a member of staff; callers to this number have commented favourably on how well they have been treated. Nevertheless, the matter is being kept under regular review by the IT and Business Support Managers to try to minimise the impact the portal's shortcomings are having.

- 5.7 The Committee noted that the IT Manager is working with Certification Office staff to provide the training required to allow them to use CMRS to process annual returns. It was noted that this handover must be completed before the Office's next annual cycle commences in January 2021.

Action: IT Manager

6 Communications Matters

Progress against Communications Plan for 2020-21

- 6.1 The Chief Executive provided an update on communications work, where the priority has been the social media advertising campaign.
- 6.2 The Committee noted that the Director of Employment Relations Services has regularly taken part in radio broadcasts and the Agency is the 'go to' organisation on employment matters for BBC Radio Ulster's On Your Behalf programme and other media outlets.

Social Media Advertising Campaign

- 6.3 The Chief Executive introduced the report on the outcomes achieved by the recent social media advertising campaign (paper FP05-12/20 refers). The campaign has been an undoubted success, with substantial increases in engagement on the Agency's social media platforms, such as Facebook.
- 6.4 It was noted that the social media algorithms meant that the advertising has produced increases in the Agency's profile that would have taken years if we had relied on organic growth. The Agency has been able to target particular demographics and there has been an increase in customers using the social media channels to contact the Agency.
- 6.5 The Communications Manager is now keen to progress to Google Ads to further boost the Agency's profile. A business case for this will be developed.
Action: Communications Manager
- 6.6 The Committee Chair commented that the Communications Manager has played an important role in raising the profile of the Agency. The Committee recognised the importance of having a communications capability in-house. The Chief Executive advised that the Communications Manager's inward secondment ends on 31 July 2021. The intention is to secure funding to create a permanent post, subject to agreement of the Board.
Action: Chief Executive

7 Business Support Matters

Update on accommodation matters

- 7.1 The Chief Executive reported that the James House Design Team has produced a new design for consideration. The new design provides more collaborative space, and fewer workstations, to better support agile working. The Committee noted that, post-Covid, most staff only plan to attend the office to engage with colleagues and deliver services; desk-based work will mostly be carried out at home. This approach has been agreed by the ERG sub-group on James House and the Trade Union Side.
- 7.2 The ERG sub-group is engaging with colleagues on the revised design and will provide feedback on this on 14 December 2020.

Action: Chief Executive

Update on Customer Service Excellence matters

- 7.3 The Business Support Manager reported that it is anticipated that assessment against the Customer Service Excellence standard will take place in March 2021.
- Action: Business Support Manager**
- 7.4 Following the positive 'mystery shopping' exercise of the Workplace Information Service, a similar exercise was carried out with the reception service. The exercise scored very highly in all aspects with very positive comments highlighting how welcoming and professional reception staff are.

Update on Outcome Based Accountability measures

- 7.5 Customer satisfaction and outcome measures for conciliation and mediation services are being finalised. Further work is needed to look at how webinars can be evaluated.
- Action: Business Support Manager**
- 7.6 The Business Support Manager reported that a meeting has been scheduled with the NOW group for 11 December 2020 to discuss the Agency's approach to outcome measures.

Action: Business Support Manager

Update on Official Statistics

- 7.7 The Business Support Manager reported that the Agency has now been formally invited by NISRA to become a provider of official statistics. Legislation will come into effect in April 2021. Statistics are published quarterly on the Agency's website. Positive feedback has been received from NISRA on the quality of the Agency's statistics.

8 Any Other Business

8.1 None.

9 Date of Next Meeting

9.1 The next meeting will be on 2 March 2021.