

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM  
HELD ON 16 MARCH 2021 AT 10.00 VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE**

**Present:**

Don Leeson	Chief Executive (Chair)
Avril Alexander	Employment Relations Manager (ERM)
Fionn Davey	Chair, NIPSA Branch 180
Paul Lowe	Interim Director of Corporate Services
Mark McAllister	Director of Employment Relations Services
Alison Wolfe	Minute Secretary

**Apologies:** Neill Wallace                      Employment Relations Manager (ERM)

The Chief Executive welcomed everyone to the meeting. As this is the last formal meeting for Avril Alexander and Neill Wallace under the 'Give SLT a go' initiative, the Chief Executive thanked them for their contribution. Claire Kilpatrick and Helen Smyth will join SLT at the beginning of April for three months.

**Declarations of Interest:** no conflicts of interest were declared.

**1. Minutes from the Senior Leadership Team meeting held on 16 February 2021**

- 1.1 Subject to a correction to paragraph 2.4, which should read 'Workplace Relations Commission', the minutes of the meeting held on 16 February 2021 were agreed for publication on the Agency's website (paper SLT 01-03/21 refers).

**Action: Secretary**

**2. Actions arising from the previous meeting**

- 2.1 Directors reported that they met to discuss mentoring arrangements for SMT members while on SLT and have identified a process going forward (paragraph 2.1 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

**Action: Directors**

- 2.2 The Chief Executive reported that the IT Manager has prepared a paper setting out the Agency's technical requirements for IS managed services in James House (paragraph 2.2 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). A meeting with IT Assist to discuss these requirements has been arranged for 23 March 2021.

**Action: Chief Executive/Interim Director of Corporate Services**

2.3 A response is awaited from DfE to the Agency's comments on the initial draft Partnership Agreement (paragraph 2.3 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

**Action: Chief Executive**

2.4 The Chief Executive reported that his counterpart in the Workplace Relations Commission has written to the international agencies proposing that their annual meeting will not be held in Ireland in 2021; as an alternative, each agency should record their country report as a webinar (paragraph 2.4 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). It is further proposed that the 2022 event should be hosted by the USA; the island of Ireland will then host in 2023.

**Action: Chief Executive**

2.5 Following a procurement exercise, an events management company has been selected to progress work on an employment relations conference in 2022 (paragraph 2.5 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

**Action: Chief Executive**

2.6 Following an informal JNCC meeting on 12 March 2021, the HR Team is preparing a proposal to address a range of recruitment matters, including a competition to fill Administrative Officer vacancies (paragraph 6.4 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

**Action: Chief Executive/Interim Director of Corporate Services**

2.7 The Chief Executive thanked Helen Smyth and Neill Wallace for their work on developing a vaccine policy for the Agency (paragraph 3.4 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). The policy has been shared with members of the NI Engagement Forum for comment. The Chief Executive also thanked the Trade Union Side (TUS) for their prompt feedback.

**Action: Chief Executive/Director of Employment Relations Services**

2.8 The Chief Executive awaits feedback from his correspondence to DfE highlighting shortcomings in the Agency's founding legislation (paragraph 3.6 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). DfE's response is awaited.

**Action: Chief Executive**

2.9 The Director Employment Relations Services reported that a stakeholder has obtained legal advice with regard to independent appeals, which differs from that of the Agency's. Further information is awaited.

**Action: Director of Employment Relations Services**

2.10 The Agency's response to the Programme for Government is to be finalised ahead of the closing date of 22 March 2022.

**Action: Chief Executive/Interim Director Corporate Services**

### 3. Chief Executive's Update

3.1 The Chief Executive reported that the Agency has submitted a bid for additional NI Protocol funding to support a Knowledge Manager post at ERM grade. The post holder would work closely with the Equality Commission and Human Rights Commission's Dedicated Mechanism Unit monitoring Article 2 compliance issues and case law. The post holder would also provide support to the Roundtable, conduct research and update staff through training and briefing sessions. If the bid is successful, a job description will be developed for consultation with TUS and confirmation of grading through job evaluation.

**Action: Chief Executive/Interim Director of Corporate Services**

3.2 It was noted that an announcement by DfE on new Board appointments is awaited.

### 4. Directors' Updates

4.1 The Interim Director of Corporate Services highlighted a number of issues, including the following:

- 4.1.1 Thanked TUS for their positive engagement in respect of revisions to policy documents;
- 4.1.2 Assessment against the Customer Service Excellence standard is taking place today;
- 4.1.3 An issue has arisen in respect of the Code of Conduct for Board Members. The Agency has followed the Department of Finance model code for public bodies, which allows a limited amount of political activity. However, DfE's Board appointments documentation is more restrictive. DfE advice is awaited;
- 4.1.4 The Employment Relations Officer recruitment process is progressing;
- 4.1.5 Arrangements are in place for a third cohort to undertake the Leadership and Development programme;
- 4.1.6 Demonstration of an app-based intranet platform is being arranged;
- 4.1.7 In line with a recommendation from the Investors in People (IiP) assessor, an adviser has been identified to support action planning to achieve IiP Platinum;
- 4.1.8 Publication of the research report on workplace dispute resolution practices and associated press release will be on 28 March 2021; and,
- 4.1.9 Subject to safety considerations, the Certification Officer may wish to hold in-person hearings in May, June and September 2021. It was noted that a risk assessment will be required before hearings can take place.

4.2 The Director of Employment Relations Services highlighted a number of issues, including the following:

- 4.2.1 Workplace Information Service calls have exceeded 20,000, with service targets being met despite the increased volumes thanks to the dedication of the team;
- 4.2.2 Cross-team meetings have been re-established;
- 4.2.3 Due to changes to the IR35 changes, the Agency will be required to determine the employment status of Arbitrators. The consensus is that they are 'workers', but this has implications for the Agency regarding such issues as Freedom of Information and Data Protection liabilities. These issues will be addressed through the current review of independent appeals;
- 4.2.4 Work on the Covid-19 vaccine policy is progressing;
- 4.2.5 The latest cohort of the Line Manager's Certificate has successfully completed, with positive feedback from participants;
- 4.2.6 Manufacturing NI have expressed an interest in working with the Agency on economic recovery, which is being followed-up by the Regional Office ERM;
- 4.2.7 FSB are willing to partner with the Agency to develop a publication on returning to work in a hybrid capacity and also to look at the possibility of replicating the partnership arrangement between FSB and Acas in NI;
- 4.2.8 Work on the micro-site for the new document review service is progressing well;
- 4.2.9 Conciliation volumes remain high, although slightly down on recent levels; and,
- 4.2.10 Holiday pay conciliation preparations are progressing well, although finalising the deal for one very large public body has stalled. This is being follow-up.

## 5. Board Matters

### Actions arising from the last Board meeting

- 5.1 The SLT reviewed the actions from the last Board meeting (paper SLT 02-03/21 refers).
- 5.2 The Interim Director Corporate Services will prepare the action points paper for March 2021 Board meeting.

**Action: Interim Director Corporate Services**

### Preparation for the next Board meeting

- 5.3 The SLT reviewed the agenda for the forthcoming Board meeting (paper SLT 03-03/21 refers).

5.4 It was noted that the Minister for the Economy may attend the Board meeting to thank the Chair and departing Board members for their service.

## 6. People Matters

### HR metrics

6.1 The SLT noted the HR Metrics (paper SLT 04-03/21 refers).

### Other people matters

6.2 It was noted that the HR Team will be meeting with Healthy Place to Work to discuss arrangements for conducting staff interviews to probe stress-related matters.

6.3 The Interim Director Corporate Services asked SLT colleagues to encourage staff to join the Employment Relations Group, which is looking to refresh its membership.

**Action: All**

## 7. Performance against Business Plan for the period ended 28 February 2021

7.1 The Senior Leadership Team reviewed the report on performance against Business Plan (paper SLT 05-03/21 refers). The report will be amended in light of comments.

**Action: All**

7.2 As part of the Board induction programme, it was agreed to look at the possibility of site visits to Head Office, Regional Office, and Killymeal House, possibly holding some induction meetings in the former if it is safe to do so.

**Action: Chief Executive**

## 8. Finance Matters

### Management Accounts for the period ended 28 February 2021

8.1 The SLT noted the Management Accounts (paper SLT 06-03/21 refers). The Chief Executive reported that a resource budget underspend of approximately £80k was expected due to delays in filling posts, although a number of expenditure plans were still in progress.

8.2 The Chief Executive advised that, subject to discussions with DfE and the NI Audit Office, it may be possible to make a provision in the accounts for Head Office dilapidations. In order to achieve this, the services of a surveyor are being procured to provide a more accurate estimate of the Agency's likely liability. If a provision is made, this will significantly reduce budget pressures in 2021-22.

**Action: Chief Executive**

8.3 It was noted that further information has been received from DfE regarding the staff pay award, which will provide a more accurate estimate of the Agency's liability.

## **9. Corporate Risk Register**

9.1 The updated Risk Register (paper SLT 06-03/21 refers) was noted.

9.2 The assessment of three risks have been reduced in light of actions taken.

## **10. Any Other Business**

10.1 The Chief Executive reported on his meeting with the former Chair of CIPD NI to discuss the organisation's views on the Agency and to explore the possibility of partnership working. CIPD carry out work in partnership with Acas and there may be an opportunity to replicate this in NI.

**Action: Chief Executive**

10.2 It was agreed that the SMT meeting on 24 March 2021 should focus on the Agency's work to support economic recovery.

**Action: Director of Employment Relations Services**

## **11. Date of Next Meeting**

11.1 The next formal SLT meeting will be on 13 April 2021 at 9.00am, by videoconference.

**Action: Secretary**