

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM HELD AT 10.00am
ON 15 JUNE 2021 VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Present:	Don Leeson	Chief Executive (Chair)
	Fionn Davey	Chair, NIPSA Branch 180
	Claire Kilpatrick	Employment Relations Manager (ERM)
	Paul Lowe	Director of Corporate Services
	Mark McAllister	Director of Employment Relations Services
	Helen Smyth	Employment Relations Manager (ERM)
	Alison Wolfe	Minute Secretary

As this is the last formal meeting for Claire Kilpatrick and Helen Smyth under the 'Give SLT a go' initiative, the Chief Executive thanked them for their contribution. In return, Claire and Helen thanked the Chief Executive for the opportunity to join SLT. Patricia Coulter and Paul Herink will join SLT at the beginning of July for three months.

Apologies: None

Declarations of Interest: no conflicts of interest were declared.

**1. Minutes from the Senior Leadership Team meeting held on 4 May 2021
(paper SLT 01-06/21)**

1.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 4 May 2021 were agreed for publication on the Agency's website.

Action: Secretary

2. Actions arising from the previous meeting

2.1 The next Oversight and Liaison meeting with DfE is scheduled to take place on 8 July 2021 (paragraph 2.3 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). An invitation was extended to the two ERMs to attend.

Action: Chief Executive

2.2 A meeting of the Roundtable has been arranged for 22 June 2021 at which the Chief Executive will invite stakeholder representatives to join a working group to curate the employment relations conference (paragraph 2.5 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). The Communications Manager is exploring the possibility of inviting Matthew Taylor as a keynote speaker at the conference.

Action: Chief Executive/Communications Manager

- 2.3 The Chief Executive has prepared an action plan for the Roundtable for the year ahead (paragraph 2.9 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).
- 2.4 Helen Smyth reported that no further arrangements have been made for promotional work around the menopause at work guidance (paragraph 2.10 from the minutes of the last meeting refers). Over 100 people attended the menopause webinar on 10 June; feedback has been positive. A further event is being arranged for World Menopause Day in October 2021.
Action: Helen Smyth
- 2.5 Tom Boydell will host a workshop for the SMT on 23 June 2021 (paragraph 2.11 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). An invitation was extended to the Branch Chair to attend.
Action: Chief Executive
- 2.6 Training for SMT members in complaint handling is being progressed (paragraph 2.12 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). It was agreed to include this training in the Learning and Development Plan for 2021-22.
Action: Director of Corporate Services
- 2.7. Helen Smyth reported that the IT Manager is adding recorded webinars to the Agency's website (paragraph 2.14 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).
- 2.8 The Director of Corporate Services reported that he is awaiting a proposal from an organisation regarding team building for SLT and SMT members (paragraph 3.5 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). The proposal will focus initially on how SLT engage with each other, work collaboratively and reflect on individual styles, before looking at the wider SMT. The proposal will be shared with SLT members when received.
Action: Director of Corporate Services
- 2.9 The IT Manager has completed 'sanity' testing of CMRS Phases 3, 4 and 4.1 enhancements. The Business Support Manager is identifying individuals to complete formal testing.
Action: Director of Corporate Services
- 2.10 A review of the Service Level Agreement with the Certification Officer will be progressed in due course (paragraph 10.1 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).
Action: Director of Corporate Services

3. Chief Executive's Update

3.1 The Chief Executive reported that he met with Regional Office staff to discuss concerns about future accommodation. Staff were in agreement that the key issue is to build and maintain connectivity. The Chief Executive and staff discussed regional hubs and having a visible presence in the Derry/Londonderry area. It was noted that there are currently more staff employed in the Regional Office than at any time in the past. The final decision on accommodation will be subject to discussion by the Board.

Action: Chief Executive

3.2 The Chief Executive reported that a planned meeting with Invest NI to discuss the possibility of joint working had to be postponed. It is hoped that this can be re-arranged in the near future.

Action: Secretary

3.3 Consideration is being given to the Chief Executive having a Twitter account, which would provide an opportunity to comment on relevant issues and highlight the work of staff. The Chief Executive and Communications Manager would manage the account.

Action: Chief Executive/Communications Manager

3.4 The Chief Executive reported that he met with the Chief Executive of the Equality Commission. They agreed that it would be useful for the Chairs and Chief Executives of both organisations to meet to discuss issues of common interest. An in-person meeting has been arranged for 6 July 2021.

Action: Chief Executive

3.5 The Chief Executive provided an update on a possible international agencies event. It has been suggested that each organisation prepare a pre-recorded webinar to highlight work throughout the last 12-18 months along with a specialised topic of their choosing such as hybrid service delivery, remote working. Options are being explored to host a virtual meeting, but this will be challenging given the different time zones involved.

Action: Chief Executive

3.6 Plans are being made for an in-person meeting of the Chairs and Chief Executives from Acas, the Workplace Relations Commission and the Agency. The meeting will be hosted by Acas in late September.

Action: Chief Executive/Secretary

3.7 The Chief Executive reported that he met with the Agency's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Champion to discuss the role. The Champion is enthusiastic and passionate about the subject and has been meeting others to inform consideration of key issues. They will be seeking the views of staff about Agency involvement in Pride if one is planned for this year and whether LGBTQ+ staff would welcome this support.

Action: Chief Executive/EDI Champion

3.8 The third cohort of the Leadership Development programme concludes on 29 June 2021. Plans are being made for a fourth cohort later in the year.

Action: Chief Executive/HR

3.9 Discussions are ongoing with DfE in respect of a business case and the approvals required for new IS Managed Services arrangements, ahead of relocation to James House.

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services

3.10 The Chief Executive met Business Support Team (BST) colleagues and the Trade Union Health and Safety Representative to discuss updating preparations needed in respect of a return to the office when public health constraints allows. The Chief Executive is keen to put the current limited opening hours on a more formal basis and facilitate limited numbers of BST staff access to process post and begin 'weeding' paper files in preparation for relocation.

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services

4. Directors' Updates

4.1 The Director of Employment Relations Services provided a detailed update.

4.2 It was noted that call volumes to the Workplace Information Service (WIS) have fallen back to pre-pandemic levels, although concerns remain that they could surge again when furlough ends.

4.3 Proposals regarding longer-term plans for the Mediation Service will be presented to the September 2021 Board meeting.

Action: Director of Employment Relations Services

4.4 The Chair, Chief Executive, Director of Employment Relations Services and Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (the Board reference point for the review) will be meeting on 28 June 2021 to consider next steps in respect of the Review of the Independent Appeal Service.

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Employment Relations Services

4.5 The Director of Corporate Services provided a detailed update.

4.6 It was noted that the James House Transitional Working Group meets on 17 June 2021 where the possibility that rent will increase from a nominal licence fee to market rates after five years will be discussed. Questions regarding why some services will not be managed on a shared basis will also be raised.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

4.7 Legislation to designate the Agency as a provider of official statistics is being progressed through the Assembly for implementation from 1 July. In readiness, the IT Manager has prepared a detailed report setting out definitions to ensure consistency of reporting.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

4.8 It was noted that the Agency plans to reflect the NICS pay awards for 2020-21 and 2021-22 in salaries for August 2021, including arrears. The Branch Chair reported that, while members are disappointed about the scale of the pay award and its imposition by the NICS, staff are grateful to the Agency for progressing this so promptly.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

5. Board Matters

Actions arising from the last Board meeting

5.1 The minutes of the last Board meeting and actions arising from this were noted (paper SLT 02-06/21).

Preparation for the next Board meeting

5.2 The key agenda items for the June Board meeting were agreed (paper SLT 03-06/21).

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services

6. People Matters

HR metrics

6.1 The HR Manager presented the HR Metrics (paper SLT 04-06/21), which were noted.

6.2 The significant number of staff with 100% attendance during 2020-21 was noted. However, there is a concern about 'presenteeism' and line managers have been asked to monitor this.

6.3 As discussed at JNCC, it was noted that there are a number of staff who will reach pension age and may choose to retire in the coming years. HR will consider what support can be provided in terms of retirement planning. Workforce planning will also need to take account of this.

Action: HR Managers

Recruitment plans

6.4 The HR Manager provided an update on current recruitment exercises, which was noted.

People matters

6.5 The People Strategy will be developed over the course of the summer for consultation with SMT, Trade Union Side, Employment Relations Group and Finance and Personnel Committee. It will then be finalised for submission for Board approval in September 2021.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

7. Annual Report and Accounts for 2020-21

7.1 The Annual Report and Accounts were discussed at the Audit and Risk Assurance meeting on 7 June 2021. The Chief Executive reported on very positive feedback from the Committee, both in terms of comments on performance of staff and achievements over the last year. The Agency also received a 'clean bill of health' from the NI Audit Office.

7.2 Feedback from the Committee's in-camera session with Internal and External Audit was extremely positive; no issues were raised and the auditors praised the way the organisation is managed and the governance controls in place.

7.3 The Chief Executive has suggested that the Chair may wish to record a video message to staff expressing the Board's appreciation to them.

Action: Chief Executive

8. Corporate Plan for 2021-25

8.1 The consultation period for the Agency's Corporate Plan (paper SLT 05/06-21) ended on 31 May 2021. Positive feedback was received from Acas, CIPD, the Equality Commission, and the Fair Work Commission, Australia. DfE also provided detailed comments.

8.2 The Corporate Plan was agreed subject to a number of drafting changes in light of the feedback. The Plan will be submitted for Board approval.

Action: Chief Executive

9. Business Plan for 2021-22

9.1 The Business Plan (paper SLT 06-06/21) was agreed, subject to amendments in line with changes to the Corporate Plan. The Plan will be submitted for Board approval.

Action: Chief Executive

10. Finance Matters – Management Accounts for the period ended 31 May 2021

10.1 It was noted that the Internal Auditors recommended that Management Accounts should be prepared earlier than in previous years, reporting expenditure for May. This is subject to the budget allocation having been confirmed.

10.2 The SLT noted the Management Accounts for the period ended 31 May 2021, which will be submitted to the June 2021 Board meeting (paper SLT 07-06/21). An underspend of £171,000 below profile is reported. The underspend stems mainly from employment costs because of recruitment delays and an outstanding rates bill.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

11. Corporate Risk Register

11.1 The Director of Corporate Services reported that, in light of new Board appointments, it has been agreed to postpone the annual Risk Workshop with Audit and Risk Assurance Committee and SMT members. Arrangements are being made to hold the workshop in August 2021, which will include training on risk identification and management as part of induction arrangements for new Committee members.

Action: Chief Executive/Secretary

11.2 In light of the above, the Board agreed to roll forward the current Risk Register (paper SLT 08-06/21). A new Register will be developed following the Risk Workshop.

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services

11.3 It was noted that the risk regarding the Agency's reputation has been downgraded as resources have been put in place to deal with the influx of holiday pay cases.

11.4 In light of earlier discussions regarding a possible surge in WIS calls following the ending of furlough, SLT members agreed to discuss future contingency planning.

Action: SLT

11.5 It was noted that an independent appeal hearing, which had been paused pending resolution of a legal matter, could now proceed. A possible and unavoidable risk resulting from this regarding the Agency's founding legislation was acknowledged; this matter would need to be referred to DfE if it materialised.

11.6 An issue was raised regarding the impact of colour coding in the Risk Register on readers with colour blindness. Helen Smyth agreed to seek comments from a colleague who has this condition on how this can be overcome.

Action: Helen Smyth

12. Early Conciliation Evaluation

12.1 The Director of Corporate Services reported that DfE has a statutory obligation to evaluate Early Conciliation (EC) after 12 and 36 months of operation. The Agency has agreed to input to these reviews.

12.2 The SLT noted the evaluation information prepared for DfE (paper SLT 09-06/21). As well as quantitative data, the paper included feedback from Conciliation Officers, which is particularly insightful.

12.3 It was clear from the evaluation paper that the first year of EC had been challenging because of the pandemic and the high volume of large multiple cases because of holiday pay and redundancies. These not only presented service delivery issues, but distorted the data from what might be expected in a 'normal' year. It was hoped a clearer picture of the effectiveness of EC would emerge after the 36-month review.

12.4 The SLT approved the evaluation paper for submission to the June 2021 Board meeting and then DfE.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

13. Any Other Business

13.1 There was no other business.

14. Date of Next Meeting

14.1 The next formal SLT meeting will be on 17 August 2021 at 10.00 am, by videoconference.

Action: Secretary