

**MINUTES OF THE 473rd MEETING OF THE LABOUR RELATIONS AGENCY BOARD
HELD AT 10.00am ON 31 MARCH 2022
IN LABOUR RELATIONS AGENCY GORDON STREET, BELFAST**

Present: Gordon Milligan (Chair)
Geraldine Alexander
Clare Duffield
Deirdre Fitzpatrick
Kevin McCabe
Michelle McGinley
Jill Minne
John Taylor
Lee Wilson

In Attendance:	Don Leeson	Chief Executive
	Paul Lowe	Director of Corporate Services
	Mark McAllister	Director of Employment Relations Services
	Pamela Robinson	Executive Assistant (minutes)
	Alison Wolfe	Secretary
	Aideen Duggan	Board Apprentice

Apologies: Daire Murphy

This was the Board's first ever 'hybrid' meeting, with a number of participants attending by videoconference.

This was also Alison Wolfe's final Board meeting before retirement. Board members expressed their appreciation to Alison for her 39 years' service to the Labour Relations Agency and wished her well for her impending retirement.

Board members met 'in-camera' prior to formal commencement of the meeting. The key points from this discussion are recorded at agenda item 1.

Declarations of Interest: None.

1. Chair's Opening Remarks

- 1.1 The Chair reported on recent meetings held with key stakeholders.
- 1.2 The Chair, Chief Executive, and Director of Employment Relations Services met the Assistant Secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions on 10 March 2022 to discuss the current industrial relations climate in NI. This included the support the Agency provides to the parties to disputes through the Collective Conciliation Service.

- 1.3 The Chair and Director of Employment Relations Services met the Minister for the Economy on 21 March 2022 to discuss action taken by P&O Ferries to make staff redundant. The Minister subsequently referred to the meeting when addressing the Assembly. Board members commended those staff who worked on the St Patrick's Day public holiday and throughout the following weekend to respond to media enquiries about the matter.
- 1.4 The Board noted that the Chair had attended the launch of Neurodiversity in Business at the Houses of Parliament on 22 March 2022. The event provided an important opportunity to promote the work of the Agency and network.
- 1.5 The Chair and the Chief Executive are due to meet the economist who is reviewing the terms of reference for the Employment Relations Roundtable on 13 April 2022. The Board will be updated on progress in due course.

Action: Chair/Chief Executive

2. Minutes of Previous Board Meeting

- 2.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 24 February 2022 (paper BP01-03/22) were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting, and for publication on the Agency's website.

Action: Executive Assistant

3. Action Points from Previous Board Meetings

- 3.1 The Chief Executive introduced the progress report on action points from previous Board meetings (paper BP02-03/22), which was noted by the Board.
- 3.2 A meeting with University of Warwick researchers took place on 10 March 2022 to discuss further research to support the Employment Relations Model for NI, which is an objective in the Business Plan for 2022-23 (agenda item 5). It is intended that the research will be available for the Agency's employment relations conference, which has been rescheduled for 23 February 2023. It was noted that DfE approval will be required before the research can go ahead.

- 3.3 Board members have each been invited to complete a questionnaire on Board effectiveness. The results will be collated for discussion at the May 2022 Board meeting.

Action: Board members/Chief Executive

- 3.4 Board member appraisals will be scheduled for April/May 2022.

Action: Executive Assistant/Chair

- 3.5 Board members noted that the Corporate Plan for 2021-25 and Business Plan for 2021-22 have been formally approved by DfE and published on the Agency's website.

- 3.6 It was noted that the Agency is continuing to promote its guidance on hybrid working. The focus of this work is on preparing for hybrid working while the Executive's Covid-related guidance remains for employees to work from home where they can.
- 3.7 The Chief Executive reported that the Department of Finance has informed the Agency that Head Office relocation to James House has been delayed because of the loss of a key sub-contractor to the refurbishment project. Relocation is now planned for 15 August 2022. The Board noted that the Agency will holdover its current lease, which is due to expire on 31 May 2022, until such time as notice to leave can be given with confidence that James House will be available for occupancy within the three-month notice period required for exiting the lease.
- 3.8 The Board approved a proposal to create a temporary Employment Relations Manager post to progress equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) priorities as outlined in the Business Plan for 2022-23 (agenda item 5). In the meantime, Board members noted that the Agency has achieved the Diversity Mark Bronze Award and congratulated the Staff EDI Champion for her work on this important and challenging achievement.

Action: Chief Executive

- 3.9 It was noted that a job description for an additional IT Manager has been developed for consultation with Trade Union Side.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

4. Chief Executive's Report

- 4.1 The Chief Executive presented the report (BP03-03/22), which was noted by the Board.
- 4.2 The Chief Executive reported on recent meetings with senior trade union officials to discuss the review of the Independent Appeals Service. Options for the future of the service will be prepared for Board consideration.
- 4.3 In the meantime, it was noted that work is continuing to clear the backlog of independent appeal hearings, which built-up during the pandemic. It is estimated that it will take at least 12 months to clear the backlog. The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) is monitoring progress.
- 4.4 It was noted that a meeting with Legal Island has been scheduled for 7 April 2022 to discuss mediation provision in NI. This will inform proposals for the future of the Agency's Mediation Service.

Action: Chief Executive

4.5 The Director of Employment Relations Services provided an update on current collective conciliation cases.

5. Business Plan for 2022-23

5.1 The Chief Executive introduced the draft Business Plan for 2022-23 (paper BP04-03/22), which reflects the priorities agreed at last month's Board planning workshop.

5.2 The SLT highlighted the key objectives and actions under each Strategic Theme in the draft plan. The Board noted that delivery of Strategic Theme 2 is largely dependent on securing staff to support the work of the Employment Relations Roundtable. These employment costs will be included in the Budget for 2022-23, which will be presented to the next Board meeting for approval, and the funds sought through an in-year bid as part of June Monitoring.

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services

5.3 Board members noted that the draft plan will be updated to include the Chair and Chief Executive's Foreword and minor drafting changes suggested by DfE. An objective to raise awareness of new rights in respect of safe leave for victims of domestic abuse, which emanate from a Private Member's Bill passed into legislation by the Assembly in March 2022, will also be included in the plan.

5.4 The Board approved the Business Plan for 2022-23 for submission to DfE, subject to the above changes and any drafting points Board members may wish to suggest by email within the next week.

Action: Board members/Chief Executive

6. Organisational Transformation (Paper BP05-03/22)

6.1 The Chief Executive introduced the paper, which outlines the SLT's approach to transforming the Agency to better deliver the Agency's Corporate Plan (paper BP05-03/22).

6.2 Board members noted that the transformation is multi-faceted, embracing: hybrid working and Head Office relocation; equality, diversity and inclusion; restructuring to create multi-disciplinary teams centred on customer needs; and introducing a coaching culture into the Agency. The transformation programme is being progressed in partnership with the Trade Union Side.

6.3 An externally-supported process review is underway to inform detailed proposals. The proposals will be presented to the Board for approval later in 2022-23.

7. Revised Board Governance and Standing Orders

- 7.1 The Chief Executive introduced the revised Board Governance and Standing Orders document (paper BP06-03/22).
- 7.2 It was noted that the revised Standing Orders incorporate legal advice provided by the Departmental Solicitor's Office and best practice suggested by a corporate governance expert, which were considered at the January 2022 Board meeting. The changes were subsequently scrutinised by the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) at its meeting on 7 March 2022.
- 7.3 It was agreed that the quorum for Board meetings should be increased from the five to six and expressed as '50%+1' of the cohort of members. This will avoid the need to revisit the Standing Orders in the event that a member leaves the Board.
- 7.4 Subject to the above change, the revised Board Governance and Standing Orders document was approved. The final agreed version will be circulated to Board members and published on the Agency's website.

Action: Chief Executive

8. Audit and Risk Assurance Committee – Report on Meeting held on 7 March 2022

- 8.1 The ARAC Chair presented the report on the Committee's meeting held on 7 March 2022 (paper BP07-03/22), which was noted by the Board.

9. Revised Corporate Risk Register Format

- 9.1 The Chief Executive presented the revised format for the Corporate Risk Register (paper BP08-03/22).
- 9.2 It was noted that the format has been revised in response to an internal audit recommendation following a review of the Agency's corporate governance arrangements. A prototype of the changes were considered at a workshop involving ARAC and SLT members, and subsequently reviewed by ARAC at its meeting on 7 March 2022.
- 9.3 The revised format was approved by the Board and will be used for the Corporate Risk Register for 2022-23. A workshop to review the Agency's risks is being scheduled for members of ARAC and the wider Senior Management Team in April 2022. The Corporate Risk Register for 2022-23 will then be prepared for consideration at the next Board meeting.

Action: Chief Executive

10. Board Learning and Development Plan for 2022-25

10.1 The Director of Corporate Services presented the Board Learning and Development Plan, which covers the remaining period of the Corporate Plan (paper BP09-03/22). This builds on the induction programme completed by new Board members in 2021.

10.2 It was noted that the plan was developed following individual meetings between the HR Managers and Board members. The Board commended the HR Managers for their work on this.

10.3 The Board Learning and Development Plan was approved. It was noted that it is a dynamic document, which will be updated in light of Board member appraisals and reviewed annually.

11. Any Other Business

11.1 There was no other business.

12. Review of the Meeting

12.1 Board members confirmed they were content with the quality of the papers and discussion at the meeting.

12.2 It was agreed that the hybrid format of the meeting was effective and will be an option for meetings going forward. However, the preference is for in-person meetings, where possible.

13. Date of Next Meeting

13.1 The next Board meeting will be on 19 May 2022 in the Agency's Head Office.
Action: Executive Assistant

13.2 The agenda for the next meeting was noted (paper BP10-03/22).

13.3 It was noted that, given that the date of the Agency's employment relations conference coincides with that of the February 2023 Board meeting, the Board meeting will be rescheduled.

Action: Executive Assistant