

**MINUTES OF THE 476th MEETING OF THE LABOUR RELATIONS AGENCY BOARD
HELD AT 10.00am ON 25 AUGUST 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
Neill Wallace Workplace Information Service Manager¹
Caroline Samia Workplace Information Service Team

Leader¹

Fionn Davey Trade Union Representative¹
Dessie Woods Trade Union Representative (by video)²
Aideen Duggan Boardroom Apprentice
Christine Magill Boardroom Apprentice Designate
Oliver Murray Executive Assistant

Apologies: Daire Murphy

This was new Executive Assistant Oliver Murray and Boardroom Apprentice Designate Christine Magill's first meeting. The meeting was also attended at the relevant agenda items by representatives of the Agency's Trade Union Branch and Workplace Information Service.

This was Aideen Duggan's final meeting at the Agency's Boardroom Apprentice. A presentation to mark the Board's appreciation of her contribution to the work of the Agency during the 12 months of her apprenticeship was made before the meeting commenced.

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

Declarations of Interest: None.

¹ Attended agenda items 5 and 6.

² Attended agenda item 5.

1. Chair's Opening Remarks

- 1.1 The Board noted that new Boardroom Apprentice Christine Magill was attending this meeting as part of her induction programme. This was before formally starting her 12-month apprenticeship with the Agency on 1 September 2022.

2. Minutes of Previous Board Meeting

- 2.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 23 June 2022 (paper BP01-08/22) 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 actions from previous Board meetings (paper BP02-08/22), which was noted by the Board.

- 3.2 Board members noted that, following an internal recruitment exercise, the current Staff Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Champion has been promoted to fill a new temporary role as EDI Manager. Their first priority is to develop an EDI Strategy for the Agency; a draft will be presented for consideration at the next Finance and Personnel Committee and then for approval at the November 2022 Board meeting. The Strategy will include consideration of the resources required to deliver it.

Action: EDI Manager

- 3.3 Based on the Chief Executive's advice, it was agreed not to proceed with unconscious bias training in the manner previously proposed. Board members' development in this area will be considered in the context of the new EDI Strategy.

Action: Chief Executive/EDI Manager

- 3.4 The Director of Employment Relations Services provided an update on the developing new partnership with Independent Health and Care Providers.

- 3.5 Board members noted that, following a meeting on 24 August 2022 involving the Chair, Chief Executive and the contractor, work to review the terms of reference for the Employment Relations Roundtable is expected to resume shortly. This had been delayed by ill health. The outcome of the review will be reported to the Board and key stakeholders during autumn 2022.

Action: Chair/Chief Executive

4. Chief Executive's Report

4.1 The Chief Executive presented the report (paper BP03-08/22), which was noted by the Board.

4.2 The Chief Executive briefed the Board on an escalated risk regarding IS Managed Services. The contract with the current service provider has an option to be extended by a further 12 months from 1 September 2022. This is to allow space to complete preparations to migrate services to IT Assist in 2023. However, the provider has indicated that it may not be able to continue services because of increasing cost pressures. The Senior Leadership Team is urgently assessing options and next steps. The Risk Register will be updated to reflect the increased level of risk and mitigating actions for discussion at the forthcoming Audit and Risk Assurance Committee meeting on 19 September 2022.

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services

4.3 The Chief Executive reported on the establishment of a number of new staff networks within the Agency. This follows the success of the Women's Network, which is sponsored by Board member Jill Minne and greatly appreciated by staff. Board members were invited to volunteer to sponsor other staff networks.

Action: Board members

4.4 The Chief Executive reported that preliminary testing of fixes to address technical problems with the Early Conciliation web portal have been successful; full user acceptance testing is being scheduled. In the meantime, a demonstration of Acas' new portal has been arranged as part of consideration of the longer term development of the system.

Action: Chief Executive

4.5 The Director of Employment Relations Services provided an update on the caseload of pay-related collective conciliations currently being facilitated by the Agency to resolve the disputes. Board members noted that recently trained Collective Conciliators are partnering experienced colleagues in these to further develop their competence.

4.6 The Chief Executive reported on the success of the Agency's participation in Belfast Pride on 30 July and plans to attend Foyle Pride on 27 August 2022. Further EDI initiatives were discussed. It was noted that these have largely been responsive to opportunities and are not resource intensive. A more strategic approach to participation in events will follow once the EDI Strategy is in place.

4.7 The Agency's participation in the International Industrial Relations Agencies Conference on 12-16 September 2022 in Washington DC was noted. A report back on this will be provided to the Board in due course. The Chief Executive confirmed that this annual event provides a unique and valuable opportunity for agencies across the world to learn from practice elsewhere. The Agency and Workplace Relations Commission jointly hosted the conference in 2021, which was held online because of Covid-related safety precautions.

Action: Chief Executive

4.8 Board members noted the Department for the Economy's (DfE) new Culture Charter. This was previewed at an event for the Department's arm's length bodies in May 2022 and is expected to be referenced by senior DfE officials when they attend the Board Strategy Day in September (below).

4.9 Board members noted the latest position regarding relocation of the Agency's Head Office to James House. A new planning schedule has been issued by the Department of Finance, which envisages the Agency relocating in early December 2022. However, this remains subject to further change.

5. Annual Employment Relations Update from the Trade Union Side

5.1 The Chair and Deputy Chair of the Trade Union Branch Committee briefed Board members on the current employment relations climate within the Agency. The Trade Union Side confirmed that employment relations continue to be positive and partnership working with the Senior Leadership is as strong as it has ever been.

5.2 The Trade Union Side briefed the Board on current issues of concern for staff, most notably fears about the rising costs of living. The Board also noted that the Management and Trade Union Sides are working closely to evolve hybrid working arrangements in light of feedback from an informal pilot since April 2022.

5.3 The Board thanked the Branch Chair and Deputy Chair and Branch Committee members for the work they do to support staff and their positive attitude to partnership working.

6. The Work of the Workplace Information Service

6.1 Representatives of the Workplace Information Service (WIS) briefed Board members on their work. Anonymised accounts of some of the challenging and distressing calls handled were provided, together with insights into the impact these have on WIS Team members. Arrangements to support the resilience of staff and the management of post-call impacts were noted.

6.2 The Board thanked the representatives for the briefing and asked that Board members' appreciation for the work of the WIS Team is relayed to colleagues.

Action: WIS Team Senior Manager

7. Programme for Board Strategy Day

7.1 The Chief Executive introduced the Programme for Board Strategy Day (paper BP04-08/22). The externally facilitated event, which will be held at an external public venue on 28 September 2022, will be followed the next day by the monthly Board meeting.

7.2 The objectives for the event were noted, although there was concern that the programme might be too ambitious. Board members were asked to let the Chair have thoughts on how the programme might be modified.

Action: Board members

8. Finance and Personnel Committee – Report on Meeting held on 2 August 2022

8.1 The report on the meeting of the Finance and Personnel Committee held on 2 August 2022 (paper BP05 08/22) was presented by the Committee Chair. The report was noted by the Board.

9. Business Plan Performance Report for the Period Ended 31 July 2022

9.1 Given the time devoted to the WIS briefing, the Business Plan Performance Report for the period ended 31 July 2022 (paper BP06-08/22) was dealt with on an exception basis. The Chief Executive confirmed that there were no current concerns regarding delivery of the Business Plan.

10. Management Accounts for the Period Ended 31 July 2022

10.1 Given the time devoted to the WIS briefing, the Management Accounts for the period ended 31 July 2022 (paper BP07-08/22) was dealt with on an exception basis. The Director of Corporate Services confirmed that the outcome of bids for additional funding from DfE are awaited; there were no other current issues regarding the budget.

11. Dates of Next Meetings

11.1 The next Board meeting will be on 29 September 2022 in Malone House, starting at 9.00am, following the previous day's Board Strategy Day. The draft agenda for the Board meeting (paper BP08-08/22) was noted.

11.2 It was agreed to hold the subsequent Board meeting, which is scheduled for 27 October 2022, at the Regional Office in Derry/Londonderry. This will provide an opportunity for Board members to meet staff and local stakeholders.

Action: Executive Assistant