

MINUTES OF THE 487th MEETING OF THE LABOUR RELATIONS AGENCY BOARD
HELD ON 23 AUGUST 2023 AT 10.00AM AT THE LABOUR RELATIONS AGENCY
HEAD OFFICE, JAMES HOUSE, 2-4 CROMAC AVENUE, BELFAST, BT7 2JA

Present: Gordon Milligan (Chair)
Geraldine Alexander
Clare Duffield
Kevin McCabe
John Taylor
Lee Wilson

In Attendance: Don Leeson Chief Executive
Paul Lowe Director of Corporate Services
Mark McAllister Director of Employment Relations
Virginia Aldana Boardroom Apprentice (designate)
Christine Magill Boardroom Apprentice (current)
Fionn Davey NIPSA Branch 180 Chair (agenda item 6)

Apologies: None

This was hybrid meeting with some Board members attending via videoconference.

This was Christine Magill's final meeting as 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.

Declarations of Interest: None

1. Chair's Opening Remarks

- 1.1 The Board noted that new Boardroom Apprentice Virginia Aldana 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 2023.
- 1.2 The Chair provided an update regarding the appointment of new Board members.
- 1.3 It was noted that Lee Wilson will continue as acting chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) for the September 2023 meeting. Decisions on Board roles will be taken once new Board members have been appointed.

1.4 The Chair briefed the Board on the Engagement Forum meeting held on 28 June 2023, which the Agency was invited to convene by the Head of the Civil Service. The meeting included a presentation on Northern Ireland's current economic position. The slide deck from this presentation will be shared with Board members.

Action: Chief Executive

1.5 The Board noted that terms of reference for a new forum to be created from the Employment Relations Roundtable and the Engagement Forum on Covid-19 are being prepared for consultation with stakeholders. These will be presented to the Board in due course.

Action: Chief Executive

1.6 The Board noted that the emerging conclusions from the review of the Agency, which was conducted by the Department of Finance's Business Consultancy Service (BCS), are very positive. BCS will present their review report at the Board Strategy Day; the date for this will be confirmed once new Board members have been appointed.

Action: Chief Executive

2. Horizon Scanning for Opportunities and Risks

2.1 The Board noted that publication of research on the costs of workplace conflict, which is currently being scheduled, presents an opportunity to profile the work of the Agency.

Action: Director of Employment Relations Services

2.2 The Chief Executive reported that, following the success of the Belfast Pride panel discussion regarding respectful workplace conversations and LGBT+ employees, there are opportunities to further promote the Agency's guidance through repeat events for other equality categories. The Board noted that consideration is being given to a similar event to mark the International Day of Disabled Persons in December 2023.

Action: Chief Executive

2.3 The Chief Executive reported on two new risks, which have been escalated for inclusion on the Corporate Risk Register. The first of these is in relation to ensuring the adequacy of safeguards in respect of personal data in light of recent breaches experienced by a large public body, which has attracted a good deal of media scrutiny and public comment. The other risk relates to potential issues that have emerged in securing suitable Regional Office accommodation on the Government Estate when the current lease expires in June 2024. These risks will be discussed in greater detail at the forthcoming ARAC meeting.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

3. Minutes of Previous Board Meeting

- 3.1 Minutes of the Board meeting held on 23 June 2023 (paper BP01-08/23) were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting for publication on the Agency's website.

Action: Executive Assistant

4. Action Points from Previous Board Meetings

- 4.1 The Chief Executive presented the progress report on actions from previous Board meetings (paper BP02-08/23), which was noted by the Board.
- 4.2 The Director of Corporate Services reported that penetration testing by a National Cyber Security Centre-approved contractor to assess the strength of the Agency's cyber security protections is underway. This will take a number of weeks to complete.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

- 4.3 It was noted that preparation of the programme for the Board Strategy Day has been delayed pending the appointment of new Board members. Subject to appointments being confirmed, a draft programme will be presented to the next Board meeting.

Action: Chief Executive

5. Chief Executive's Report

- 5.1 The Chief Executive presented the report (paper BP03-08/23), which was noted by the Board.

- 5.2 The Board noted that the Chair and Chief Executive plan to meet their Workplace Relations Commission counterparts on 2 October 2023, in Dublin. A report back will be provided in due course.

Action: Chief Executive

- 5.3 The Director of Corporate Services provided an update on the Agency's new apprenticeship programme. The Board congratulated the Director of Corporate Services on this innovative approach and the HR Team for the work to bring this concept to fruition.

- 5.4 The Director of Employment Relations Services briefed the Board on the current caseload of collective conciliations. While it was noted that the Agency refrains from promoting its success in resolving industrial disputes, given the confidential nature of discussions, it was agreed to benchmark Acas' approach in seeking to measure the economic impact of this work.

Action: Director of Employment Relations Services

6. Annual Employment Relations Update from the Trade Union Side

- 6.1 The Chair of the Agency's Trade Union Branch briefed the Board on the current employment relations climate within the organisation. It was noted that this is an important safeguard within the Agency's governance arrangements, which allows the trade union direct access to the Board, and it is good practice to allow employees' voice to be heard in the Boardroom.
- 6.2 The Branch Chair confirmed that employment relations continue to be positive and partnership working with the Senior Leadership remains very strong.
- 6.3 The Branch Chair briefed the Board on current issues of concern for staff, most notably the costs of living and the level of the recent NICS pay award, which continues to be the subject of industrial action. Internally, it was confirmed that staff are content with the direction of the transformation programme and hybrid working arrangements, which are currently being evaluated.
- 6.4 The Board thanked the Branch Chair and Committee members for the work they do to support staff and their positive attitude to partnership working.

7. Business Plan Performance Report for the Period Ended 31 July 2023

- 7.1 The Business Plan Performance Report for the period ended 31 July 2023 (paper BP04-08/23) was noted by the Board.
- 7.2 The Board noted that Agency's Business Plan for 2023-24 was approved by the Department for the Economy (DfE) on 23 June 2023.
- 7.3 The Director of Corporate Services briefed the Board on interim IT support services that come into effect when the current service provider's contract ends on 31 August 2023. These are expected to remain in place until migration to IT Assist takes place; this is anticipated to be in 2024.
- 7.4 The Director of Corporate Services reported on the external review of the Agency's case management and records system (CMRS), which concluded in June 2023. This has recommended that CMRS be transformed into a cloud-based system. A number of benefits will be realised from this, including allowing migration of the Agency's desk-top computing arrangements to IT Assist. A business case for the CMRS upgrade is being prepared and funding sought from DfE.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

8. Management Accounts for the Period Ended 31 July 2023

8.1 The Director of Corporate Services presented the Management Accounts for the Period Ended 31 July 2023 for 2023-24 (paper BP05-08/23), which were noted by the Board.

8.2 The Board noted that employment costs are currently higher than profile. A review of expected expenditure is underway to ensure any potential overspend is averted.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

9. Any Other Business

9.1 There was no other business.

10. Date of Next Meeting

10.1 The next Board meeting has been rescheduled for 6 October 2023.

Action: Executive Assistant

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