

MINUTES OF THE 489th MEETING OF THE LABOUR RELATIONS AGENCY BOARD
HELD ON 26 OCTOBER 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
Elizabeth Armstrong
Sarah Havlin
Kevin McCabe
Orla Sheils
Mark Spence
John Taylor
Lee Wilson

In Attendance: Don Leeson Chief Executive
Mark McAllister Director of Employment Relations Services
Virginia Aldana Boardroom Apprentice
? Emily Erickson University of Warwick (agenda item 6)
Chris Warhurst University of Warwick (agenda item 6)
Scott Alexander Adviser (agenda items 6 and 7)

Apologies: Clare Duffield

The meeting was preceded by an event with former Board members to thank them for their service to the Agency and share their experiences with new Board members.

This was a hybrid meeting with some participants attending via videoconference.

Declarations of Interest: None.

1. Chair's Opening Remarks

- 1.1 The Board reflected on the success of the previous day's Strategy Day. The Strategy Day included a presentation and discussion on corporate governance good practice, a briefing from senior Department for the Economy (DfE) officials on current and future priorities, a presentation on the outcome of the Department of Finance's Business Consultancy Services' (BCS) review of the Agency, and a forward look at priorities for the Business Plan for 2024-25. The presentation slides used at the Strategy Day will be circulated to Board members.

Action: Executive Assistant

1.2 A number of decisions and actions were taken at the Board Strategy Day, as follows:

- The Board Practice and Standing Orders document will be updated to cover changes in committee membership, handling 'conflicts of loyalty' and expectations regarding Board member 'ambassadorial' activities.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

- The Agency will seek opportunities, and additional funding where appropriate, to build on its role to support delivery of the 10X Economic Strategy.
- Comment on the draft report from BCS on the outcome of the review of the Agency and table the final report at the next Board meeting, when received.

Action: Chief Executive

- Prepare a draft Business Plan for approval at the February 2023 Board meeting, based on discussions at the Strategy Day.

Action: Chief Executive

1.3 A number of changes to committee membership and other Board roles were agreed, following the recent appointment of new Board members. Membership of the committees and the assigned Board roles are now:

- Audit and Risk Assurance Committee: Lee Wilson (Chair); Clare Duffield; Sarah Havlin; Orla Sheils; and, Mark Spence.
- Finance and Personnel Committee: Geraldine Alexander (Chair); Elizabeth Armstrong; Kevin McCabe; John Taylor; and, Lee Wilson.
- Board Deputy Chair: Geraldine Alexander.
- Board contact for the Agency's Raising Concerns (Whistleblowing) Policy: Orla Sheils.
- Board Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Champion: Kevin McCabe.
- Board Mental Health Champion: Geraldine Alexander.
- Staff Disability Network Mentor: Lee Wilson.
- Staff LGBT+ and Allies Network Mentor: Geraldine Alexander.

1.4 The Raising Concerns (Whistleblowing) Policy will be updated with details of the new Board contact.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

1.5 It was noted that a volunteer is needed to mentor the staff's Women's Network.

Action: Chair/Board members

1.6 It was agreed to arrange training for the new Audit and Risk Assurance Committee.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

2. Horizon Scanning for Opportunities and Risks

2.1 The Board was briefed on planning for holiday pay conciliation, following the outcome of the Supreme Court decision in respect of the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and another v Agnew and others. A procurement exercise has been completed to appoint a workforce planning expert to assist the Agency in developing a business case for additional staff to manage the expected substantial increase in demand for conciliation services. It was noted that the Corporate Risk Register will be updated to reflect the risks associated with this matter.

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services

2.2 The Board noted the long term absence on sick leave of the Director of Corporate Services and plans to make an interim appointment to cover this critical role. The Board asked the Chief Executive to let the Director know that he is in their thoughts.

Action: Chief Executive

2.3 The Board noted the planned retirement of the IT Manager and plans to appoint an IT Project Manager to support the transitioning of the Agency's IS managed services to IT Assist.

3. Minutes of Previous Board Meeting

3.1 Minutes of the Board meeting held on 6 October 2023 (paper BP01-10/23) 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 BP02-10/23), which was noted by the Board.

- 4.2 The Director of Employment Relations Services reported that the stakeholder working group to develop a governance framework for the independent appeals service is scheduled to meet on 8 November 2023. An update on this will be provided at the next Board meeting.

Action: Director of Employment Relations Services

- 4.3 The Board noted that the Agency is reviewing a revised draft Partnership Agreement, which has been prepared by DfE. It is intended that the final version will be presented for approval at the November 2023 Board meeting.

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services

5. Chief Executive's Report

- 5.1 The Chief Executive presented the report (paper BP03-10/23), which was noted by the Board.

- 5.2 The Director of Employment Relations Services briefed the Board on the current caseload of collective conciliations.

- 5.3 The Chief Executive provided an update on the Agency's financial position to date. While expenditure is currently in line with the budget profile, a number of pressures have emerged. These are in respect of additional staff to prepare for holiday pay conciliation and cover long term absences, and unexpected additional costs associated with Head Office relocation. A bid has been submitted to DfE for additional funding as part of the January Monitoring exercise.

- 5.4 The Board approved a proposal to organise a conference in partnership with DfE in March 2024 to promote flexible working, in line with commitments under the Department's 10X Delivery Plan for 2023-24.

Action: Chief Executive

- 5.5 The Board noted that the timings for a number of planned activities might have to be put back because of staff absences and preparation for holiday pay conciliation. This includes publication of guidance aimed at preventing workplace sexual harassment, prepared in partnership with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. It was agreed to keep the timetable for this guidance under review and, if at all possible, publish this during the 16 days of activism following the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on 25 November 2023.

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Employment Relations Services

6. The Links between Good Jobs and Productivity, Innovation and Worker Wellbeing

6.1 Dr Emily Erickson and Prof Chris Warhurst from the University of Warwick presented the key findings from research commissioned by the Agency on links between good employment practice and organisational success. The research is supported by good practice case studies from Collins Aerospace in Killeel and FinTrU.

6.2 The Board agreed that the research will prove invaluable in promoting the importance of good employment practice in the context of the 10X Economic Strategy and underpinning the Agency's advisory work.

6.3 It was noted that the Agency is working with the research team to finalise the report and associated policy brief for publication. Thereafter, it was agreed that there should be a concerted campaign to raise awareness of the research among key influencers in Government and business.

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Employment Relations Services

7. Development of a Good Employment Charter for Northern Ireland

7.1 Scott Alexander briefed the Board on emerging thinking on the Good Employment Charter, which the Agency is developing. It was noted that the commitment to develop the Charter flowed from the Agency's conference in February 2023.

7.2 It was agreed that, as a next step, the Agency should engage with partners and stakeholders to further refine the draft Charter. A final version will then be presented to the Board for approval in March 2024.

Action: Director of Employment Relations Services

8. Business Plan Performance Report for the Period Ended 30 September 2023 – Exception Report

8.1 The Board noted a number of delays to Business Plan activities as reported in the Chief Executive's Report (paper BP03-10/23).

9. Management Accounts for the Period Ended 30 September 2023 – Exception Report

9.1 The Board noted the current financial position as reported in the Chief Executive's Report (paper BP03-10/23).

10. Mid-Year Assurance Statement

10.1 The Board noted the Mid-Year Assurance Statement as submitted to DfE (paper BP04 10/23).

11. Any Other Business

11.1 There was no other business.

12. Date of Next Meeting

12.1 The next meeting of the Board will be on 22 November 2023 at 10.00am in James House. The draft agenda for the meeting (paper BP05-10/23) was noted by the Board.

Action: Executive Assistant

12.2 The Board approved the schedule of meetings for the period to March 2025 (paper BP06-10/23). It was noted that the next meeting of the Finance and Personnel Committee is being rescheduled.

Action: Executive Assistant

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