

**MINUTES OF THE THREE HUNDRED AND THIRTY NINTH MEETING OF THE
LABOUR RELATIONS AGENCY BOARD HELD AT 9.30 AM
ON THURSDAY, 16 OCTOBER 2008
IN THE OFFICES OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT STAFF COMMISSION,
GORDON STREET, BELFAST**

Present: Jim McCusker (Chair)
Patricia O'Farrell
Peter Williamson
Rodan Ward
Julie Anne Clarke
Norma Heaton

In Attendance: William Patterson (Chief Executive)
Gerry O'Neill (Director, Corporate Services)
David McGrath (Director, Advisory Services)
Alison Wolfe (Minutes Secretary)

1. Apologies

Action

Apologies were received from Brenda Maitland and Penny Holloway.

The Chief Executive advised Members:

- On the reason for the change of venue for the meeting;
- That he would be attending talks with the parties in a current collective dispute later in the morning;
- That Kieran Mulvey, LRC CEO was unavoidably detained and was unable to attend the meeting but that Professor Paul Teague QUB had agreed to make a presentation on the role of the ROI Rights Commissioners.

2. Minutes of Previous Meeting held on 25 September 2008

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2008 were proposed by Peter Williamson, seconded by Patricia O'Farrell, and agreed as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

3. Matters Arising from the Previous Minutes not listed on this Agenda

3.1 LRA/Equality Commission Meeting – 4 November 2008

It was noted that the Chief Executive was awaiting notification from

Evelyn Collins CEO EC of the venue and time for the joint Commission/Board meeting on 4 November. Members would be informed in due course.

CEO/Secretariat

3.2 Corporate Plan meeting with NIC-ICTU

Board Members were reminded that NIC-ICTU had been unable to attend the recent stakeholder meeting. Arrangements had now been made to meet with NIC-ICTU representatives on 3 November to hear their views on the Agency corporate planning process.

Chairman/CEO

4. Chairman's Business

4.1 Chairman/CEO meetings with staff regarding Agency services

The Chairman advised Board Members that he and the Chief Executive had met with staff to discuss their ideas on the advisory services provided by the Agency. In discussion with Enquiry Point staff it was noted that calls were considerably up (700pw). The reasons for this would be analysed further. Lost calls had made up 28% of calls received. This was comparable with the ACAS figure. A survey on the effectiveness of the new telephone system should be available by February 2009.

DAS

The meeting with Advisory staff involved in workshops/seminars had been lively. Members of staff were particularly keen to see the services of the Agency promoted although there was some concern about meeting the extra demand this may create. It was generally felt that a better understanding and knowledge of Agency services would be of benefit for the general public and service users. Staff also raised the development of links with CAB offices and accommodation within HQ as requiring further attention.

It was noted that further staff meetings were scheduled in the coming weeks.

It was felt that there was a consistent theme through both stakeholder and staff groups that the Agency needed to address the marketing of its services. It was agreed that the Agency had unique selling points which it should be promoting. It was noted that the Advisory section would be taking an exhibition stand at a small firm's event in November where it would be promoting Agency services. An Advisory officer was in the process of drawing up a marketing plan which could be integrated into the Agency Business Plan 2009/10.

DAS

Discussion then took place around the issue of accommodation. It was noted that the main lease on the Agency's premises including Unit 2, would end in 2013. Mention was made of the current proximity of the Agency to the Industrial Tribunals; however it was

noted that the Tribunals would soon be moving to the Gasworks site. It was agreed that the location of and accommodation for the Agency would be a matter of strategic consideration for the Board during 2009/11.

Chairman/CEO

4.2 *Appointment of President of the Industrial Court*

The Chairman reported that Eugene O'Loan had been appointed as President of the Industrial Court.

4.3 *Board Vacancies*

The Chairman reported that interviews had taken place w/c 6 October. The selection panel had made recommendations to the Minister. As agreed at the last meeting, the Chairman had impressed upon the Department the importance of appointing Board Members quickly as there may be difficulties in obtaining a quorum at meetings. If a delay ensues the Chairman may register the Board's concerns directly with the Minister.

Chairman

4.4 *Review of Public Administration*

The Chairman said that this item had been added to the agenda to ascertain whether or not it should be a standing item. The Chairman provided some background to the review which he said had been slow to gain momentum. Board Members agreed that this should be a standing item on the agenda for future meetings.

Secretariat

4.5 *Annual Report – Chairs Forum*

The Chairman reported that he had received the Annual Report of the NI Chairs Forum – a group formed for Chairs of public bodies.

5. *Audit Sub-Committee*

5.1 *Meeting held on 15 October 2008*

Roden Ward gave a verbal report on the meeting.

The main item on the agenda had been the Agency risk register. Of particular concern was the area of IS/IT with particular reference to data security and business continuity. It was noted that there was an opportunity for the sharing of services in respect of IS/IT. Board Members felt this was a promising way forward. It was noted that Treasury had tightened up on security/continuity and as a result the Agency had to regularly report on these issues.

DCS

Concern was expressed about the high volume of governance issues requiring the time of Agency staff. This was another area where the sharing of specialist resources might be a positive way forward.

The DEL audit indicated that the systems operating within the Agency were acceptable with the exception of the Government Purchasing Card. With regard to the GPC and the actions taken both the internal auditor and NIAO considered the action taken to be adequate.

DCS

The Committee had agreed to use the NIAO template for the Committee self assessment.

Audit Cttee

It was noted that Internal Audit will be starting their inspection on 10 November with the report being considered by the Committee in March 2009.

Audit Cttee

Following discussion the Chairman indicated that when the new Board Members are appointed the Board would review the membership of both Board Sub-Committees.

Chairman

It was noted that the minutes of the previous Audit Committee meeting would be on the agenda for the November meeting.

Secretariat

6. NI Economic Conference 1 October 2008

Patricia O'Farrell reported on the NI Economic Conference which she had attended recently. She said that the Conference was high powered with a number of presentations given mainly by economists and concentrating on the downturn in the economy, the European Commission NI Taskforce and the skills agenda. Patricia brought back literature from the Conference which she said was useful and interesting. Members were also given a web address where they could view and download the documents.

Board Members

7. Chief Executive's Report

7.1 LRA Training Policy – re-draft (Paper 32/08)

The CEO had taken on board comments made at the last Board meeting. The Training Policy now placed more emphasis on learning and development opportunities.

Following discussion Board Members endorsed the revised Policy.

7.2 IS/IT Strategy

It was agreed that this matter had been dealt with under item 5. The Agency was awaiting the final draft of the IS Strategy from PWC.

CEO

It was noted that PWC may be available to make a presentation to the Board in November on the IS Strategy.

7.3 *IiP*

It was noted that an update on progress was contained in the CEO monthly report. The IiP assessment was due to take place on 6 & 7 November 2008.

CEO

7.4 *Equal Pay Audit*

The DCS advised Board Members of a discussion with a NISRA representative. A meeting with NISRA had been arranged for 21 October. It was agreed that this item would be reported as a standard item on the Board agenda.

CEO/DCS

7.5 *Monthly Management Report*

The CEO reported that both the IiP Away Day and Corporate Plan meetings with staff had gone exceptionally well. A synopsis of the critical themes was currently being prepared.

CEO

The DAS reported that the forthcoming evaluation of the Enquiry Point would provide an insight as to how services could be improved.

DAS

With regard to a joint LRA/LRC research exercise the DAS reported that the Agency was having great difficulty in progressing matters with the LRC. Whilst this was frustrating the Agency would continue to attempt to make contact with LRC.

DAS

It was noted that the Lecturers Negotiating Committee had approached the Agency with regard to a long standing dispute over pay. The Agency anticipates offering facilitation in an attempt to resolve the issue.

CEO/DAS

The DCS circulated the monthly finance report to the Board. It was noted that in terms of normal expenditure the Agency was more or less breaking even. However, only £25k had so far been spent out of the £250k of carry over funding. It was noted that the research budget may not be fully spent this year due to factors beyond the control of the Agency. In these circumstances, the Board was supportive of carry over funding being appropriately re-allocated to support IS Security provision.

CEO/DCS

It was suggested that following the appointment of new Board Members it may be opportune to re-establish a Research Committee.

Chairman

8. *Review of Dispute Resolution in Northern Ireland*

The DEL pre-consultation report was circulated to Members.

It was noted that the Chairman will be writing to the Chair of the DEL Assembly Committee indicating that the Agency would wish to meet

Chairman

and discuss matters.

9. Corporate Correspondence Received Relevant to Board

Noted.

10. Any Other Business

None.

11. Presentation by Professor Paul Teague

Professor Paul Teague gave a presentation to the Board on the role of the Rights Commissioner in the Republic of Ireland. He informed Members that the Rights Commissioner role was established in 1969 to avoid the escalation of small scale industrial disputes. There are currently 14 Rights Commissioners appointed by the Secretary of State. Professor Teague went on to explain how the Rights Commissioners operated and what issues would have to be examined if such a system was to operate in NI. Board Members then posed some questions to Professor Teague. In conclusion the Chairman thanked him for his presentation and said he would look forward to reading Professor Teague's report on equality issues.

12. Date of Next Meeting

- Tuesday, 4 November – Joint meeting with Equality Commission (details to be advised to Members)
- Tuesday, 18 November – Board Away Day (The Mount Business & Conference Centre) 10.00 am – 4.00 pm
- Thursday, 27 November 2008 – Eileen McBride to brief Board Members on the current issues facing OITFET, the DEL Review of Dispute Resolution in NI and the pros and cons of establishing an EAT in NI

The Chairman also raised the question of holding either a special meeting or extended Board meeting to discuss the final DEL report on dispute resolution. The report was due to be published in January/February 2009. The Chairman indicated that he would like to have a greater consensus of opinion on the way forward for the Agency particularly in light of today's presentation.

CEO