

**Minutes of the Finance and Personnel Committee meeting held on 2 June 2020 at 10.00am
by videoconference**

Present: Albert Mills (Chair)
Michelle McGinley
Gary McMichael

In attendance: Tom Evans (Chief Executive)
Don Leeson (Director of Corporate Services)
Angela Bryans (HR Manager)
Claire Kilpatrick (HR Manager)
Keelin Kelly (Communications Manager)
Mary O'Brien (Business Support Manager)

The Chair welcomed everyone to what was the first meeting of the Committee conducted by videoconference.

Declarations of Interest: no conflicts of interest were declared.

1. Minutes of the Last Meeting

- 1.1 The minutes of the Finance and Personnel Committee meeting held on 5 December 2019 (paper FP 01 06/20 refers) were agreed as an accurate record.
- 1.2 It was noted that the Committee's meeting, which was scheduled for 3 March 2020, was cancelled because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Matters Arising from the Last Meeting

- 2.1 The Committee noted that the NIPSA full time official now attends formal JNCC meetings to provide additional support to the Branch (paragraph 4.5 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).
- 2.2 Outstanding actions from the last meeting are dealt with under the relevant substantive agenda item.

3. Finance Matters

Outturn for 2019-20

3.1 The Director of Corporate Services reported that provisions made in the accounts for the 2019-20 pay award and the anticipated outcome of the Head Office Rent Review had to be increased after the year-end. This was because the pay award was a 2% increase, compared to the 1.25% the Agency had set aside based on the previous year's increase; and advice from Land and Property Services is that the Rent Review outcome might be over 50%, compared to the projected 7.65% based on the previous review in 2014. The Committee noted that DfE had provided additional funding for these matters, based on previous commitments to do so.

3.2 The Agency is challenging the level of the proposed new Head Office Rent.

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services

Budget for 2020-21

3.3 The Committee noted the Agency's budget allocation for 2020-21 (FP 02 06/20). This includes additional funding to cover increased employer pension contributions, and the impact of the pay award for 2019-20 and price inflation. Funding has also been confirmed for five posts to deal with an anticipated increase in demand for services caused by the UK's exit from the European Union.

3.4 However, it was noted that financial pressures of approximately £215k need to be managed, arising from the Head Office Rent Review outcome, the 2020-21 pay award and the cost of an inward secondment. Additional funding to offset these pressures is being sought through financial monitoring rounds.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

4. HR Matters

4.1 The Chief Executive briefed Committee members on the Agency's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Thanks to the Agency's business continuity planning arrangements, and the work of the IT Manager and ICT Support Team, all staff have been working effectively from home since 20 March 2020. Staff are also being paid a modest Working from Home Allowance for the duration of the current Covid-19 restrictions, to recognise the additional costs being incurred by them in terms of energy consumption, etc.

- 4.2 The core services required by customers during the pandemic – the Workplace Information Service (WIS) and conciliation – are being delivered remotely. WIS calls increased substantially during March/April 2020; while call volumes have reduced in recent weeks, they remain higher than pre-Covid-19 levels. Demand for these services are expected to increase again when the UK Government’s support for furloughed employees is withdrawn.
- 4.3 The Chief Executive also reported that, as the HR Managers will outline, a particular priority for the Agency during the Covid-19 restrictions, is the health and wellbeing of staff.

HR Metrics for 2019-20

- 4.4 The Committee noted the key HR metrics from 2019-20 (paper FP 03 06/20). There has been a reduction in sick absence following the implementation of the new Absence Management Policy from January 2019. However, it was also noted that absence levels are vulnerable to a small number of staff being on long term sick leave. A HR Manager report that one third of staff had a 100% attendance record during 2019-20.

Update and priorities for the next three months

- 4.5 The HR Managers outlined the work that the HR Team has been doing to support staff throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. From the outset, the Team has been focus on supporting staff’s mental health.
- 4.6 The Agency has developed the ‘Together – People Programme’, which sets the framework for HR’s actions, and which was discussed at the May 2020 Board meeting. These actions are set out by a ‘Covid-19: Staff Support Plan’ (paper FP 04 06/20). The actions were informed by the ‘Keeping Connected during COVID-19’ survey (paper FP 05 06/20), which sought staff views on communications and support activities, so that these could be targeted appropriately.
- 4.7 The survey has led to a range of actions, including: increasing the frequency of the monthly Team Briefing to weekly; activities to keep staff connected across the Agency and fund-raise for the staff’s charity of the year, such as virtual bingo and coffee mornings, a step challenge, and film and book clubs; and mindfulness sessions.
- 4.8 Furthermore, a number of HR policies have been amended to support staff with caring responsibilities, such as home schooling. This includes, for example, suspension of the flexi time band widths to allow staff to work their contracted hours when their home circumstances allow.

4.9 In line with the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, supporting positive mental health has been a particular focus of the work carried out. The HR Team's work has been supported by the Agency's cohort of trained Mental Health First Aiders who have formed an advisory group.

4.10 The Committee noted that the Agency is playing a leadership role in this area by promoting and sharing the 'Together – People Programme' to encourage dialogue between employers and stakeholders on how best to manage employment relations and support staff during the pandemic.

4.11 The Committee congratulated everyone involved for their exemplary work.

HR Work Plan for 2020-21

4.12 The Committee noted the HR Work Plan for 2020-21 (paper FP 07 06/20).

4.13 A HR Manager reported that the second Leadership Development Programme is likely to proceed as a virtual programme. The programme had been due to start in March 2020, but had to be postponed because of Covid-19 restrictions.

Employment Relations Group

4.14 The Committee was briefed on progress made by the Employment Relations Group (ERG) (paper FP 08 06/20). This is a forum for staff to participate in decision-making on key issues affecting them and to raise issues. The ERG has met twice since it was established earlier in the year and now has four sub-groups dealing with the following: Covid-19 safety measures; James House design and relocation planning; intranet development; and, reward and recognition.

Disability Action Plan

4.15 A HR Manager presented the Agency's draft new Disability Action Plan (paper FP 09 06/20). This has been developed with input from a staff working group, with expert support provided by the North West Forum of People with Disabilities. The plan covers the three-year period from 2020.

4.16 The Disability Action Plan will be issued for public consultation, with a view to presenting the outcome of this and the final version to the Committee and then Board in September 2020.

Action: HR Managers

Reward and recognition

4.17 It was noted that the Board has invited the Committee to consider how best to reward and recognise the work of staff.

4.18 It was agreed that the ERG sub-group on this matter will report to the Committee on its deliberations.

Action: HR Managers

5. ICT Matters

5.1 The Director of Corporate Services briefed the Committee on ICT matters. Their key priority has been ensuring that staff can work effectively from home during the Covid-19 restrictions. Thanks to additional capital funding provided to the Agency following January Monitoring, all staff have laptops, with widescreen monitors, and wireless keyboards and mice. A number of staff also have their office telephone handsets configured for working remotely; and many have taken home their office chairs to create a more comfortable home working environment.

5.2 The IS Managed Services provider has been providing enhanced support during the Covid-19 restrictions.

5.3 As agreed at the December 2019 Board meeting, the Agency is seeking CPD and DfE approval to extend the IS Managed Services contract until relocation to James House. The current contract is due to expire on 31 August 2020. The extension will allow more time to resolve technical and financial issues associated with migrating these services to IT Assist; or conduct a procurement exercise if the IT Assist issues cannot be resolved.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

5.4 A number of problems have been experienced with the web portal for Early Conciliation. The Director of Corporate Services reported that the Agency held a 're-set' meeting with the CMRS developer on 26 March 2020 to air concerns about these. There was then a follow-up meeting at which the company proposed changes in their approach.

5.5 The Committee noted that priority problems with the web portal have been addressed. The Agency is now preparing a specification for changes to address outstanding glitches and further enhancements to the portal; an internal user group is being consulted on the requirements for this.

Action: IT Manager

6. Communications Matters

Update and priorities for the next three months

6.1 The Communications Manager gave an update on communications activities undertaken during the last three months.

- 6.2 The Agency has received a good deal of media coverage, particularly through radio interviews, given the pre-eminent role played in advising employers and employees of Covid-19 related employment issues.
- 6.3 The Committee noted that home page of the Agency's website has been redesigned to contain the key information required by employers and employees during the Covid-19 restrictions.
- 6.4 It was also noted that there remains an outstanding action to test the website's accessibility with a focus group of disabled people. This will be progressed when resources permit.

Action: Communications Manager

- 6.5 The Committee enquired about a potentially misleading Google advertisement from a company referring to the Agency's services. It was noted that Acas has experienced similar concerns. However, having taken advice, both the Agency and Acas decided not to pursue the matter.

Awareness Survey

- 6.6 The Communications Manager gave a presentation on the key findings from the survey undertaken in May 2020 on public awareness of the Agency and the services provided. This was a follow-up survey to the initial one conducted in January 2019 to measure changes since then.
- 6.7 The Committee noted that there has been an increase in awareness levels, particularly among the working age population.
- 6.8 The survey also tested, for the first time, customer satisfaction among those respondents who had used the Agency's services. This identified high levels of satisfaction.
- 6.9 The survey results and proposed next steps will be presented to the June 2020 Board meeting.

Action: Communications Manager

7. Business Support Matters

Update and priorities for the next three months

- 7.1 The Business Support Manager gave an update business support activities undertaken during the last three months.

- 7.2 Business Support Team members have been working successfully from home and working very effectively as a team. The time has been used to make significant progress in clearing a back log of multiple Tribunal claims associated with ongoing holiday disputes.
- 7.3 Responsibility for dealing with customer queries arising from the web portal has passed to the Business Support Team. Changes have been made to guidance on the portal to make it easier for customers to use.
- 7.4 Web chat for general enquiries, managed by the Business Support Team, is now live.
- 7.5 The Committee noted that assessment against Customer Service Excellence standard was postponed because of the Covid-19 crisis. This will be re-scheduled when the current restrictions allow.

Action: Business Support Manager

- 7.6 The Business Support Manager reported that publication of statistics was delayed by EC preparations and implementation. The statistics are now being prepared for publication later in June 2020, in parallel with the development of the annual report and accounts.

Action: Business Support Manager

- 7.7 The Committee noted that OBA scorecards could not be completed because of Covid-19 constraints. Surveys to gather satisfaction and impact data did not go ahead to avoid placing burdens on customers at this time; and a very low response rate was likely. The Agency is using this hiatus to discuss with NISRA about quality assuring and refining data collection methodologies.

Action: Business Support Manager

- 7.8 The Committee commended the work of the Business Support Team and noted how integral to the Agency's success the Team has become.

Re-opening the Agency's offices

- 7.9 The Director of Corporate Services reported on the work of an ERG sub-group, which has been established with the Trade Union Side to consider what Covid-19 safety measures and behaviours need to be put in place to allow the Agency's offices to re-open. This work has been informed by safety guidance produced by the NI Engagement Forum, which the Agency facilitates.

7.10 The Committee noted that a thermal imaging camera has been installed to take staff and visitors temperature as they enter the Head Office building. A Perspex screen has also been erected across the reception counter. These, and further measures, will be set out in a paper, which will be submitted to the August 2020 Board meeting.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

7.11 A key issue for discussion with the Board will be when the Agency's offices should re-open. With the Agency operating effectively with staff working from home, and with the NI Executive's continuing advice to work from home where you can, there is no particular imperative to re-open at the present time. Given this, staff have been informed that the offices will not open before September 2020 - this gives them certainty to plan such issues as childcare over the summer months.

7.12 The Committee noted that there may be a lasting impact from the Covid-19 restrictions on plans for the Agency's new Head Office accommodation in James House, for example on space standards and 'host desking' arrangements. The next meeting of the Department of Finance's James House Project Team is awaited.

8. Any Other Business

8.1 There was no other business.

9. Date of Next Meeting

9.1 The next meeting will be on 1 September 2020.