

**MINUTES OF THE 466th MEETING OF THE LABOUR RELATIONS AGENCY BOARD
HELD AT 10.00 am ON THURSDAY 26 AUGUST 2021
VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE**

Present: Gordon Milligan (Chair)
Geraldine Alexander
Louise Crilly
Clare Duffield (agenda items 1-8)
Deirdre Fitzpatrick
Kevin McCabe (agenda item 1)
Michelle McGinley
Jill Minne
Daire Murphy (agenda items 1-4)
Lee Wilson

In Attendance: Don Leeson Chief Executive
Paul Lowe Director of Corporate Services
Mark McAllister Director of Employment Relations Services
Fionn Davey Branch 180 Chairperson (item 5)
Dessie Woods Branch 180 Assistant Secretary (item 5)
Alison Wolfe Minute Secretary
Sarah Livingstone Boardroom Apprentice

Apologies: None

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

This was Sarah Livingstone's last meeting as the Agency's Boardroom Apprentice. The Board thanked Sarah for her contribution.

New Boardroom Apprentice, Aideen Duggan, joins the Board for the 12-month apprenticeship programme, which commences on 1 September 2021.

Declarations of Interest: None

1. Chair's Opening Remarks

- 1.1 The Chair reported that the in-camera session was used to update Board members on plans for the Board's away day on 30 September and 1 October 2021. This will include workshops on corporate governance and strategy. An invitation will be extended to the Minister for the Economy and DfE's Permanent Secretary to join the event for discussions with the Board.

Action: Chair/Chief Executive/Secretary

- 1.2 The Chair and Chief Executive met with their counterparts from the Equality Commission on 12 August. It was agreed to hold a joint Board meeting on 2 December 2021.

Action: Chief Executive/Secretary

- 1.3 The respective Chairs and Chief Executives of the Agency, Acas and the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) will meet in London on 29 September 2021 to discuss joint working and closer collaboration between the organisations.

Action: Chair/Chief Executive/Secretary

- 1.4 The next meeting of the NI Engagement Forum will be on 9 September 2021. The Permanent Secretaries of the Departments for the Economy and Communities will provide updates at the meeting. The Chair reported that the Forum is in the process of commissioning a review of its terms of reference.

Action: Chair/Chief Executive

2. Minutes of previous Board meeting

- 2.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 24 June 2021 (paper BP01-08/21) were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting, and for publication on the Agency's website.

Action: Secretary

3. Action Points from Previous Board meeting

- 3.1 The Chief Executive introduced the progress report on action points from previous Board meetings (paper BP02-08/21).

3.2 It was noted that obtaining case studies to promote the Joint Declaration of Protection through joint workshops with the Equality Commission is proving problematic. Consideration is instead being given to using the Agency's employment relations conference to highlight the Declaration. It will also be promoted at a good practice seminar with NIC-ICTU and the Equality Commission. The Director of Employment Relations Services will provide Board members with more information on the Joint Declaration.

Action: Director of Employment Relations Services

3.3 The Chief Executive and Director of Employment Relations Services are meeting key stakeholders to discuss draft proposals regarding the future of the Independent Appeals Service. Any issues of concern will be highlighted to the Board and a paper seeking Board approval of the review's recommendations will be brought to the September 2021 Board meeting.

Action: Director of Employment Relations Services

3.4 Training in financial procedures has been included in the Learning and Development Plan for 2021-22, which has been signed-off by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT).

3.5 The Board and Committee member induction programme is continuing. Training on risk identification and management was provided at a workshop on 5 August 2021. The Board away day will include corporate governance training and an element of team building, which concludes the induction programme. A Learning and Development Plan for Board members will be prepared to address longer term development needs.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

3.6 It was noted that, following the Risk Workshop, the Corporate Risk Register for 2021-22 is being developed. This will be considered at the September 2021 Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) meeting and then submitted for Board approval.

Action: ARAC Chair/Chief Executive

3.7 The Chief Executive thanked Geraldine Alexander for agreeing to be the Board's Mental Health Champion.

3.8 The Chief Executive reported on positive engagement with representatives of the African Caribbean Support Association NI (ACSONI). It was noted that the Staff Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Champion is in the process of mapping out priorities and areas of outreach for the Agency.

Action: Chief Executive/EDI Champion

4. Chief Executive's Report

4.1 The Chief Executive presented the report (paper BP03-08/21).

4.2 The Chief Executive reported on work to develop hybrid working guidance. The intention is to have a draft available by the end of August for consultation internally and with external stakeholders. Thereafter, it is planned to finalise the guidance for publication by the end of September 2021, in time for any change in public health guidance regarding returning to the office.

Action: Director of Employment Relations Services

4.3 The Chief Executive reported that the HR Team has been shortlisted for a CIPD NI award in the category of 'Excellence in People Management Practice in SMEs'. The Board congratulated the HR Team on their achievement and wished them well for the award ceremony on 7 October 2021.

4.4 The Board noted that conciliation work regarding holiday pay liabilities has been paused following developments in a key legal case. This work is not anticipated to resume until early 2022. The staff involved are being diverted to other priorities.

4.5 A meeting of the conference planning group took place on 17 August 2021. Plans are progressing for a physical event on 24 February 2022, with contingency planning for a virtual or hybrid event depending on public health guidance at that time. A number of speakers have been confirmed and the planning group are now identifying individual workshop topics.

Action: Chief Executive

4.6 The Chief Executive reported on a meeting which took place with senior Invest NI representatives. Agreement was reached regarding Agency involvement with new businesses coming into NI and an expansion of work with local development programmes.

4.7 The Board noted that the menopause in the workplace guidance was very well received and had good media coverage. Further joint working with NIC-ICTU on domestic abuse and workplace sexual harassment is planned.

4.8 The Board noted that preparations for a virtual international agencies event are progressing. This will include a pre-recorded video highlighting the Agency's work during the pandemic and an address by the Chair.

Action: Chief Executive

5. Annual Update from the Trade Union Side

- 5.1 The Chair welcomed the Trade Union Branch representatives to the meeting.
- 5.2 The Branch Chair thanked the Board for their invitation to provide an update on the current industrial relations climate within the Agency.
- 5.3 The Branch Chair reported that the Branch has formed a really positive relationship with the HR Team and highlighted joint working to support the health and wellbeing of staff during the pandemic. Staff are looking forward to returning to the office and adopting hybrid working arrangements. It was noted that getting hybrid working right will be a challenge for all concerned.
- 5.4 The Branch Chair and Assistant Branch Secretary thanked the Agency's management for the way they have handled issues throughout the past year. The latter also gave his personal thanks to his line manager for the support she has provided him.
- 5.5 Board members thanked the Branch representatives for their excellent work and for sharing feedback. The Agency Chair noted that it is important for the Board to have direct access to the employee voice and to take time each year to hear about the work that goes on.
- 5.6 The Chief Executive thanked the Branch Chair highlighting the strong working relationship that exists and for her work in leading the Trade Union Side.

6. Business Plan Performance Report for the period ended 31 July 2021

- 6.1 The Chief Executive presented the Business Plan Performance Report for the period ended 31 July 2021 (paper BP04-08/21), noting that there are no issues of concern at this stage of the year.
- 6.2 SLT members reported progress on particular objectives.
- 6.3 The Board noted that independent evaluation into the case management and records system (CMRS) has yet to commence. The focus is currently on concluding fixes to the web portal and future support arrangements
Action: Director of Corporate Services
- 6.4 The Board noted the Performance Report.

7. Management Accounts for the period ended 31 July 2021

- 7.1 The Director of Corporate Services presented the Management Accounts for the period ended 31 July 2021 (paper BP05-08/21).
- 7.2 The Board noted a current underspend of over £250k, which was in part due to a delayed rates bill. However, recruitment problems in attracting applicants for temporary contracts to support economic recovery has resulted in an easement of £150k, which is being surrendered as part of October Monitoring. It was noted that the staff are now in place, albeit later than anticipated in the budget.
- 7.3 The Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Services are due to meet DfE officials after the Board meeting to discuss the Agency's financial performance to date.

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services

- 7.4 The Board noted the Management Accounts for the period ended 31 July 2021.

8. Future Provision of IS Managed Services

- 8.1 The Director of Corporate Services presented the paper on the future provision of IS managed services (paper BP06-08/21), which included a business case and option appraisal.
- 8.2 The Board noted that relocation to James House required a change in IS managed services' provision. It was noted that IT Assist provides the best option in terms of managing IT risks. There will however be challenges in ensuring that CMRS can be hosted effectively. A period of overlap with existing arrangements is proposed to ensure a seamless transition.
- 8.3 The Board approved the migration of IS managed services to IT Assist, subject to confirmation that absent Board members are content. The business case will be submitted to DfE for approval. The Board will be updated regularly on progress.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

9. Any Other Business

- 9.1 Board members confirmed they were content with the quality of the papers and discussion at the meeting.

10. Date of Next Meeting

10.1 The next Board meeting will be on 30 September/1 October 2021 (venue to be confirmed).

10.2 The February 2022 Board meeting will be rescheduled to 17 February 2022.

Action: Secretary