

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM HELD AT 10.00am
ON 17 AUGUST 2021 VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE**

Present:

Don Leeson	Chief Executive (Chair)
Paul Herink	Employment Relations Manager (ERM)
Paul Lowe	Director of Corporate Services
Mark McAllister	Director of Employment Relations Services
Neill Wallace	NIPSA Branch 180 Representative
Alison Wolfe	Minute Secretary

Apologies: Patricia Coulter

Declarations of Interest: no conflicts of interest were declared.

**1. Minutes from the Senior Leadership Team meeting held on 15 June 2021
(paper SLT 01-08/21)**

1.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 15 June 2021 were agreed for publication on the Agency's website subject to the following amendments:

- ✚ Under 'Present' remove 'Interim' from Director of Corporate Services;
- ✚ Item 4.6 Action should read 'Director of Corporate Services'; and
- ✚ Amend numbering in section 4.

Action: Secretary

2. Actions arising from the previous meeting

2.1 The Chief Executive reported that DfE have amended the frequency of Oversight and Liaison meetings from quarterly to six monthly (paragraph 2.1 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). The next meeting will be held on 14 October 2021.

Action: Chief Executive

2.2 The Roundtable working group established to curate arrangements for the employment relations conference (paragraph 2.2 of the minutes of the last meeting refers) will be meeting this afternoon to discuss arrangements for the conference that will take place on 24 February 2022. Three keynote speakers have confirmed their willingness to take part in the conference, the focus of which will be on workplace relations and productivity. A draft programme will be brought to the Board in September. The Director of Employment

Relations Services referred to a podcast highlighting the productivity gap between NI, GB and RoI – link to be shared.

Action: Chief Executive/Communications Manager

- 2.3 It was noted that there was excellent coverage of the menopause at work guidance (paragraph 2.4 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). Feedback from Helen Smyth's participation on Radio Ulster's 'On Your Behalf' programme was positive. Legal Island held a follow-up event at which there was a high level of interest in the guidance. Further information to be sought on the event being arranged for World Menopause Day. Guidance is now being developed around domestic abuse and workplace sexual harassment.

Action: Director of Employment Relations Services/Helen Smyth

- 2.4 Tom Boydell hosted a workshop for the SMT on 23 June 2021 (paragraph 2.5 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). Issues raised at the workshop will be addressed through SLT and subsequently SMT team building.

Action: Chief Executive

- 2.5 Development work around Phases 3 and 4.1 CMRS are now complete (paragraph 2.9 of the minutes of the previous meeting refers. The IT Manager anticipates that outstanding work on Phase 4 will be completed this week which would allow testing to take place.

Action: IT Manager

- 2.6 A review of the Service Level Agreement with the Certification Officer will be progressed in due course (paragraph 2.10 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

Action: Director of Corporate Services

- 2.7 The Chief Executive reported that discussions are taking place with Regional Office staff and with the DoF 'Connect2' regional hubs (paragraph 3.1 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). A break clause in the Regional Office lease in August 2022 may need to be extended until 2024.

Action: Accommodation Project Manager

- 2.8 The Chief Executive and Director of Employment Relations Services will be meeting with Invest NI on 23 August to discuss the possibility of joint working (paragraph 3.2 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Employment Relations Services

- 2.9 The Chief Executive will discuss the possibility of him having a Twitter account with the Communications Manager (paragraph 3.3 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

Action: Chief Executive/Communications Manager

2.10 The Chief Executive and Chair met with their counterparts in the Equality Commission on 12 August (paragraph 3.4 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). It was agreed to arrange a joint Board meeting towards the end of the calendar year.

Action: Chief Executive/Secretary

2.11 Arrangements are being made to hold a virtual international agencies event on 11 October with the options to include a 'live' event that evening depending on the different time zones involved (paragraph 3.5 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). A planning meeting has been organised with WRC on 25 August to discuss logistics.

Action: Chief Executive

2.12 Arrangements have been made for an in-person meeting of the Chairs and Chief Executives from Acas, the Workplace Relations Commission and the Agency on 29 September (paragraph 3.6 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). Acas will host the meeting. Areas for discussion include joint working, particularly joint research topics and secondments between the respective organisations.

Action: Chief Executive

2.13 The Chief Executive continues to hold regular meetings with the Agency's EDI Champion who is continuing to develop her role (paragraph 3.7 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). The Chief Executive reported that he attended a Pride event organised by NIPSA.

2.14 It was noted that there is limited interest in a fourth cohort of the Leadership Development Programme (paragraph 3.8 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). It was agreed that staff, particularly those in junior grades, should be encouraged to take part in the programme.

Action: Directors/TUS

2.15 The Accommodation Project Manager has produced a draft proposal for re-opening Gordon Street for staff (paragraph 3.10 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). The proposals would formalise arrangements for security personnel and make the building more accessible to staff bearing in mind public health guidance. Proposals to be circulated to JNCC members for discussion on 19 August.

Action: SLT/Secretary

2.16 A paper on the Review of the Mediation service is with the Chief Executive for comment.

Action: Chief Executive

2.17 A paper on the Review of the Independent Appeals service will be presented to the September Board meeting (paragraph 4.4 of the minutes of the last

meeting refers). The Chief Executive and Director of Employment Relations Services will be meeting with a number of stakeholders to discuss proposals.

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Employment Relations Services

2.18 It was noted that it is unlikely that there will be a rent increase after five years in James House (paragraph 4.6 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). However, no firm answer has been received from Property Division.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

2.19 Legislation has now been implemented designating the Agency as an official provider of statistics (paragraph 4.7 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). The Business Support Team Manager is co-ordinating with NISRA around standards to be applied and ensuring that this feeds into work around definitions and processes. A paper is being prepared for consultation with SMT.

Action: Director of Corporate Services/BST Manager

2.20 It was noted that the NICS pay award will be included in August salaries (paragraph 4.8 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

2.21 HR are exploring what support can be provided to staff in terms of retirement planning (paragraph 6.3 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). NIPSA provide a number of services that Agency staff can access.

Action: HR Managers

2.22 Consideration will be given to comments received on colour coding used in the risk register along with whether this can be covered by narrative (paragraph 11.6 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). Consideration will also be given to correspondence with Board members in terms of presenting information.

Action: SLT

2.23 The Early Conciliation evaluation paper was submitted to DfE and will be discussed at the Oversight & Liaison meeting in October (paragraph 12.4 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

3. Chief Executive's Update

3.1 The Chief Executive reported that a Board team-building event will take place on 30 September and 1 October. Guidance from DfE indicates that a residential event would not be good value for money. Options are to hold corporate governance training, facilitated by Joy Allen, on the morning of 30 September. The recent report into Board resignations at RQIA will be one topic to focus on. The Chair is keen to use the afternoon session to look at strategic issues for the future, focussing on Communications and People

Strategies. If we have a media partner on board by then, they could be invited to discuss perceptions of the Agency. Plans include hosting an evening meal and to invite the DfE Minister and Permanent Secretary to discuss the future of the Agency. The Board meeting will take place on the morning of 1 October.

- 3.2 A further topic for consideration is cyber security although it was agreed this may be better placed alongside the IT Strategy in October.

Action: Chief Executive

- 3.3 The Chief Executive reported that the Agency is now a member of the ReWage Advisory Group; a high profile board established to support the government's strategic response to the recovery and renewal of work and employment in the UK post-Covid. The Director of Employment Relations Services attended the introductory meeting of the Group. A website has been set up as part of Warwick Institute for Employment Research – link to be provided. The Group, consisting of representatives from Acas and other organisations, is well resourced and has a very ambitious research agenda. Lisa Wilson from the Nevin Institute in Belfast will provide local input. The Agency has highlighted the recent issues about productivity.

Action: Director of Employment Relations Services

- 3.4 The Chief Executive reported that he has been in contact with the African Caribbean Support Association in NI to see if they would deliver a lunchtime talk to staff. The Chief Executive is also considering unconscious bias training and a presentation on the Diversity Charter with the initial focus around gender inclusion targets. The Agency's EDI Champion to attend the Finance & Personnel Committee on 6 September to discuss diversity. It was noted that some staff have started to use gender-neutral pronouns.

- 3.5 The Director of Employment Relations Services indicated the need to keep the workload of the EDI Champion under review. Once priorities are identified these can be discussed with HR and Managers. The importance of a measured approach to diversity charters was noted to ensure the correct pace for the Agency. However, this would be one of the dimensions of being an exemplar employer and would make a difference in service delivery and management of staff. The SLT recognised the need to be involved in issues such as age profile, leadership, outreach working and making links to future plans.

Action: Chief Executive

4. Directors' Updates

- 4.1 The Director of Employment Relations Services provided a detailed update.
- 4.2 The Economic Recovery Manager is working with his new team, getting people up to speed with the Line Manager's Certificate. A dedicated programme is being organised for a large-scale manufacturing organisation alongside the traditional programme.
- 4.3 The Agency is seeking OCN endorsement for academic recognition of the Certificate in Effective Line Management.
- 4.4 A seven-week programme is being developed for employee representatives, works councils and employee engagement forums to provide them with the practical skills and confidence to support the creation of positive and productive working environments by encouraging employers to adopt good practice in managing employment relations.
- 4.5 While the number of calls to the WIS team are down slightly, the Director of Employment Relations Services expressed concern at staff shortages in the section and the possibility of a spike in calls when furlough ends. It was noted that the contingency arrangements previously deployed worked well. However, it was recognised that any Non-ET1s arising out of furlough would put pressure on the STA team as the economic recovery team wouldn't be up to speed to do either. DfE were advised that the Agency needed to pivot between recovery and redundancy work. Arrangements are also needed to create a systematic process to vet information to keep the website up-to-date. The issue will be raised at the DERS/ERM meeting tomorrow and the situation monitored.
- 4.6 STA continue to work on the new document toolkit; INI guides, conflict at work webinar and reviewing pre-recorded case studies for the Line Manager's Certificate. Guidance on hybrid working is also being developed.
- 4.7 Work is progressing on getting Mediations and Independent Appeals up and running.

Action: Director of Employment Relations Services

- 4.8 The Director of Corporate Services provided a detailed update.
- 4.9 The Director of Corporate Services reported that while the Knowledge Manager and Accommodation Manager roles are still in their infancy he is impressed with work to date in scoping out the roles and establishing relationships.

- 4.10 ERMs are focussing on strategy papers for presentation to September Board and sub-committee meetings.
- 4.11 The Director of Corporate Services commented on the increasing number of departmental returns being received by the Agency which sometimes require turnaround at short notice.
- 4.12 Progress is being made on business cases for IS Managed Services and CMRS with the IS Managed Services paper going to the August Board for approval.
Action: Director of Corporate Services

5. Board Matters

Actions arising from the last Board meeting

- 5.1 Comments/updates on the minutes of the last Board meeting and actions arising from this (paper SLT 02-08/21) to be emailed to the Chief Executive by tomorrow.
- 5.2 The Director of Employment Relations Services highlighted case studies for the joint declaration. The dignity at work programme with NIC-ICTU will be used as a vehicle to promote the joint declaration. The Chief Executive to raise with conference working group and with the Equality Commission Chief Executive.

Action: Chief Executive

Preparation for the next Board meeting

- 5.2 The key agenda items for the August Board meeting were agreed (paper SLT 03-08/21).

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services

6. People Matters

HR metrics

- 6.1 The DCS presented the HR Metrics (paper SLT 04-08/21), which were noted.
- 6.2 It was noted that absence remains low, similar to last year.
- 6.3 The Agency recorded a record year for completion of annual performance appraisals. HR will be collating the information into a workable training plan for delivery throughout the year.

Action: HR

- 6.4 It was noted that the message around 'working from home' was confusing. The situation is developing where staff need to return to HQ to clear out so the advice on WFH has changed. The focus is on creating a safe working environment for staff to return. It was agreed to have a discussion at SMT about hybrid working and whether the policy mandates staff to come into office at least once a week.

Action: SLT

Learning & Development Plan

- 6.5 The SLT noted the Learning & Development Plan; estimated spend is £66,000; budget allocated £30,000 which reflects lIP in training staff. SLT to provide feedback to the Director of Corporate Services or HR Managers.
- 6.6 SLT agreed to remove mediation training until a decision is reached about service provision.
- 6.7 The Chief Executive indicated that he would like to include unconscious bias training targeting SMT initially and possibly recruitment panel members.
- 6.8 The SLT noted an outstanding demand for Acas to provide collective conciliation and facilitation/good employment practice training at ERM level.
- 6.9 The Chief Executive indicated that he was content to fund all training listed; issue is whether we are doing the right things and can we release staff; all seem relevant.

Resourcing plans

- 6.10 The Director of Corporate Services provided an update on current recruitment exercises.
- 6.11 Arrangements are being finalised for the AO recruitment exercise. The communications year out student is due to start in September and TUS have agreed the STA/HR student proposals.
- 6.12 Backfill for the ERO vacancy in HR will join the Agency w/c 23 August.
- 6.13 In light of a resignation at ERO grade, it was agreed to look at job enrichment. The planned structural review will provide a vehicle to do that. It was also agreed to fill the substantive EOII post when resources free up.

Other People matters

- 6.14 Policies have been agreed and signed off; one issue remains around JAB. To be discussed with the Branch Chair in advance of JNCC.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

7. Business Plan Performance Report for the period ending 31 July 2021

7.1 The Business Plan Performance Report (paper SLT 06-08/21) was noted. The volume of work remains high but the majority of objectives are on track.

Action: Chief Executive

8. Finance Matters – Management Accounts for the period ended 31 July 2021

8.1 The Director of Corporate Services reported an underspend of £268K; largely as a result of employment costs and a rates bill which is yet to be paid.

8.2 The Agency received an additional £1 million this year and is anticipating an underspend by the year-end. The Agency will therefore be surrendering £150K in the October spending round.

8.3 The SLT noted the Management Accounts for the period ended 31 July 2021 (paper SLT 07-08/21), which will be updated and submitted to the August 2021 Board meeting.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

9. Corporate Risk Register

9.1 The Chief Executive reported that the risk register (paper SLT 08-08/21) was updated following the recent Board risk workshop. A draft will be presented to SMT for comment prior to a special ARAC meeting on 10 September. It will then be submitted to the September Board meeting for approval.

9.2 In light of discussion at the risk workshop, key hazards have been added to the Register.

9.3 In planning for the employment relations conference in 2022 there is a need to recognise and factor in post-conference impact.

Action: Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services

10. Future provision of IS Managed Services – next steps

10.1 The Director of Corporate Services indicated that IT Assist is among a number of options being considered within the economic appraisal business case exercise. A paper will be presented to the August Board meeting for approval before submission to DfE.

10.2 The IT Manager reported that he is preparing a risk matrix for each option to give an overview as to the steps required as part of the decision-making

process. It was noted that a number of the risks are generic to all of the options; if these can't be addressed satisfactorily other options will need to be explored. New arrangements need to be in place prior to relocation to James House as this also ties in to work on CMRS procurement and support arrangement. Risk matrix to be appended to draft business case and circulated to SLT. Risk to be appropriately reflected on the corporate risk register.

Action: Director of Corporate Services/IT Manager

11. Draft Strategy Papers (Communications, Data, Digital & People) – next steps

11.1 The Director of Corporate Services outlined the timeline for the draft papers; finalising drafts w/c 30 August for submission to Finance & Personnel Committee on 6 September; re-draft if necessary following input; formal SLT on 21 September with submission to Board on 30 September. The Communications and People Strategy papers will be presented to the September Board meeting, Data and Digital to the October meeting. Within that timeframe Managers will also attempt to complete internal consultations as required, particularly with TUS, SMT, ERG and SLT with those views reflected before final sign-off. If necessary, Board approval can be sought subject to completion of consultation exercise and any substantive changes can be brought back to Board.

Action: Director of Corporate Services

12. Any Other Business

12.1 It was agreed to discuss the following items at the SMT on 25 August 2021:

- Risk Register;
- Discussion around hybrid working policy with input from STA team; open debate about mandatory office time and whether to adopt a position that staff can be flexible around their working hours with some requirement to come into the office each week; and
- Mediation strategy and options for this – Director of Employment Relations Services to forward version 10 for circulation in advance of SMT.

Action: Director of Employment Relations Services/Secretary

13. Date of Next Meeting

13.1 The next formal SLT meeting will be on 21 September 2021 at 10.00 am, by videoconference.

Action: Secretary