

**MINUTES OF THE 477<sup>th</sup> MEETING OF THE LABOUR RELATIONS AGENCY BOARD  
HELD AT 9.30am ON 29 SEPTEMBER 2022  
IN MALONE HOUSE, BARNETT DEMESNE, BELFAST, BT9 5PB**

**Present:** Gordon Milligan (Chair)  
Clare Duffield  
Deirdre Fitzpatrick  
Kevin McCabe  
Michelle McGinley  
Jill Minne  
Daire Murphy  
John Taylor  
Lee Wilson

**In Attendance:** Don Leeson                      Chief Executive  
Paul Lowe                                  Director of Corporate Services  
Mark McAllister                      Director of Employment Relations Services  
Christine Magill                      Boardroom Apprentice  
Oliver Murray                        Executive Assistant

**Apologies:** Geraldine Alexander

The Board meeting was held in Malone House, Barnett Demesne, Belfast, following the previous day's Board Strategy Day.

This was Christine Magill's first formal Board meeting at the Agency's new Boardroom Apprentice.

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

**Declarations of Interest:** None.

## **1. Chair's Opening Remarks**

1.1 The Chair reprised the key points from discussions at the previous day's Board Strategy Day:

- The main focus of discussions was the midpoint review of the Corporate Plan. Good progress is being made to date. The Agency has a clear agenda for the next two years and is well-placed to deliver it. Board members agreed that business plans going forward should take account of the cost of living crisis in addition to the Agency's work to promote economic growth;

- It was agreed that a Public Affairs Strategy to increase awareness of the Agency's services should be developed;

**Action: Director of Corporate Services**

- Feedback from senior officials from the Department for the Economy, who attended the afternoon session, recognised the importance of the work being delivered by the Agency and the high esteem in which the organisation is held. However, the financial climate is uncertain and scope to increase the Agency's budget is limited; any additional funding would need to be considered in the context of furtherance of the Department's wider objectives; and,
- Board members confirmed that the Agency's governance arrangements are working well.

1.2 It was noted that the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee had been due to meet on 19 September, with a report subsequently presented to this Board meeting. However, with that day designated as a public holiday to mark the Queen's funeral, the Committee meeting had to be rescheduled. The Committee will now meet on 5 October 2022.

## 2. Minutes of Previous Board Meeting

2.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 25 August 2022 (paper BP01-09/22) were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting, and for publication on the Agency's website.

**Action: Executive Assistant**

## 3. Action Points from Previous Board Meetings

3.1 The Chief Executive introduced the progress report on actions from previous Board meetings (paper BP02-09/22), which was noted by the Board.

## 4. Chief Executive's Report

4.1 The Chief Executive presented the report (paper BP03-09/22), which was noted by the Board.

4.2 The Chief Executive reported on his meeting with the Tribunal President on 27 September 2022 to discuss plans to implement judicial mediation in Northern Ireland from April 2023 and how the Agency might support this. It was agreed to arrange a briefing for the Board on this in due course.

**Action: Chief Executive**

- 4.3 The Director of Corporate Services provided an update in respect of an escalated risk regarding the Agency's computing support arrangements. A range of options are being explored. In the meantime, a meeting between the Agency, the Department of Finance and the service provider to discuss this matter is scheduled for 4 October. The outcome of this meeting will be reported to the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee meeting on 5 October 2022.

**Action: Director of Corporate Services**

- 4.4 The Director of Employment Relations Services provided an update on demand for the Agency's collective conciliation service and current industrial disputes. It was agreed that a proposal that the Agency intervenes to make recommendations to improve collective bargaining in a particular sector will be considered at the next Board meeting.

**Action: Chief Executive/Director of Employment Relations Services**

- 4.5 The Board noted the Director of Employment Relations Services' participation in a meeting of the Assembly's All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare on 7 September 2022 to discuss the Employers Guide to Childcare in Northern Ireland, which the Agency helped produce. It was agreed that access to affordable child care is a critical issue impacting on the labour market and levels of economic inactivity, which the Agency should continue to provide thought-leadership on.

- 4.6 The Board noted the Chief Executive's feedback on his participation in the International Industrial Relations Agencies conference on 12-16 September 2022 in Washington DC.

- 4.7 Board members noted the current timetable regarding relocation of the Agency's Head Office to James House. Based on this, it should be possible to hold the December 2022 Board meeting in James House. In the meantime, site visits to are being arranged for staff. The schedule of visits will be shared with Board members to enable them to join staff in viewing the new premises.

**Action: Executive Assistant**

## **5. Review of the Independent Appeals Service**

- 5.1 The Director of Employment Relations presented the report on the outcome of the Review of the Independent Appeals Service (paper BP04-09/22).

- 5.2 It was agreed that the Agency should work with stakeholders to support a managed transition to new longer term arrangements for the facilitation of independent appeals. In the meantime, stakeholders will be consulted on a new governance framework to address current shortcomings. Legal advice will be sought before proceeding.

**Action: Chief Executive/Director of Employment Relations Services**

- 5.3 It was noted that the Agency's panel of arbitrators who chair independent appeals, which has not been updated for over 10 years, needs to be refreshed.

**Action: Director of Corporate Services/Director of Employment Relations**

## **6. Public Awareness of the Labour Relations Agency – Annual Survey Results**

- 6.1 The Director of Corporate Services presented the results of the annual survey of public awareness of the Agency (paper BP05-09/22).

- 6.2 The survey shows a slight dip in awareness levels from last year. However, it was noted that, given the small sample size, this difference is within the statistical margin of error. Board members expressed support and appreciation for the Agency's communications work, which is increasing the profile of the organisation.

- 6.3 The Board noted that awareness levels are comparatively low among younger people. This demographic will be a particular target audience for communications activity going forward in the context of the Agency's new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy. In the meantime, the Agency will be participating in the forthcoming Schools Summit on 3/4 October 2022 and will be promoting the new 'First Job' leaflet, which is aimed at school leavers.

## **7. Report to Those Charged with Governance**

- 7.1 The Chief Executive presented the Report to Those Charged with Governance (paper BP06-09/22), which has been prepared by the NI Audit Office (NIAO) on the outcome of the audit of the Agency's Annual Report and Accounts for 2021-22.

- 7.2 It was noted that Audit and Risk Assurance Committee would normally have reviewed the report prior to it being submitted to the Board. However, the changes made since the Committee considered the report at its June 2022 meeting were limited. Therefore, with its last meeting being postponed, the Committee Chair had agreed that the report should come direct to the Board rather than further delay it.

7.3 The Board noted that the Comptroller and Auditor General had signed the Annual Report and Accounts for 2021-22 without qualification. Four recommendations for action have been made by the NIAO. Of these, three have been accepted and implemented with immediate effect. The Board agreed not to implement the fourth recommendation, which related to including the Statement of Financial Position in monthly management accounts. This is on the basis the time needed to prepare the Statement and the limited added value it would afford, given the nature of the Agency's budget.

7.4 The Board acknowledged the work of the Finance Team in preparing the Annual Report and Accounts, supporting the audit fieldwork, and ensuring financial probity throughout the year.

## **8. Business Plan Performance Report for the Period Ended 31 August 2022**

8.1 The Business Plan Performance Report for the period ended 31 August 2022 (paper BP07-09/22) was noted by the Board.

8.2 It was agreed that the report on review of the terms of reference for the Employment Relations Roundtable, which commenced recently, should be presented to the Board. It is anticipated that this report will be available for consideration at the November 2022 Board meeting.

**Action: Chief Executive**

## **9. Management Accounts for the Period Ended 31 August 2022**

9.1 The Management Accounts for the Period Ended 31 August 2022 report (paper BP08-09/22) were noted by the Board.

## **10. Date of Next Meeting**

10.1 The next Board meeting will be on 27 October 2022 at the Regional Office in Derry/Londonderry. It will be followed by a reception to allow Board members to meet staff and local stakeholders.

**Action: Executive Assistant**