

Minutes of the Finance and Personnel Committee meeting held on 3 February 2022 at 10.00am by videoconference

Present: Geraldine Alexander (Chair)
Michelle McGinley
Lee Wilson

In attendance: Don Leeson (Chief Executive)
Patricia Coulter (Knowledge Manager)
Paul Herink (IT Manager)
Claire Kilpatrick (HR Manager)
Paul Lowe (Director of Corporate Services)
Mary O'Brien (Business Support Manager)
Alison Wolfe (Minute Secretary)
Pamela Robinson (EOII)

Apologies: Angela Bryans (HR Manager)
Diane Edgington (Accommodation Project Manager)
Keelin Kelly (Communications Manager)
Aideen Duggan (Board Apprentice)

The Chair welcomed everyone to the first meeting of 2022 and wished everyone a happy new year. She thanked everyone for agreeing to reschedule the meeting.

The Chair acknowledged that this was Alison Wolfe's last meeting and thanked her for her work in the Agency particularly servicing the various meetings.

The Chair extended a warm welcome to Pamela Robinson and wished her every success in her new role.

Declarations of Interest: no conflicts of interest were declared.

1. Minutes of recent Meeting

1.1 The minutes of the Finance and Personnel Committee meeting held on 7 December 2021 (Paper FP01-01/22) were agreed as an accurate record.

2. Matters Arising from the Last Meeting

2.1 The Director of Corporate Services reported that the Committee's best wishes were extended to the Finance Officer following his return to work (para 4.6 of the minutes of the last meeting refers).

- 2.2 HR are consulting Managers to ensure the correct approach is taken in developing the Agency's internal Hybrid Working Policy (para 6.9 of the minutes of the last meeting refers). ERG and TUS will be consulted in due course. A Town hall meeting has been scheduled for 2 March when the broad principles of the policy will be outlined for discussion.

3. Finance Matters - Update

- 3.1 The Director of Corporate Services reported that the current focus is on managing the budget for the final quarter of the 2021-22 year, and in working closely with DfE colleagues to formulate the budget bid for 2022-23. There will be no economic recovery funding available for 2022-23 however it is anticipated that funding required by the Agency will be provided.
- 3.2 Overall resource expenditure is £225k below profile with general administrative expenditure £28k below profile. The decision was taken to vire £150k to meet spending commitments in respect of learning and development and ICT.
- 3.3 The Director of Corporate Services and Finance Officer meet on a weekly basis to monitor expenditure which is also closely reviewed through the Senior Leadership Team arrangements.
- 3.4 The Chief Executive highlighted the need to provide reassurance to staff in light of budget uncertainty, particularly those on temporary or fixed term contracts. The Committee acknowledged the difficulties in attracting and retaining staff in the context of budget uncertainties.
- 3.5 Committee members acknowledged the efforts of the Agency in carefully managing the budget in uncertain circumstances and were complimentary of the focus on learning and development.
- 3.6 The Chair thanked the Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Services for their update.

4. HR Matters

Outline of HR Work Plan 2021-22 and progress to date

- 4.1 The HR Manager reported that the HR work plan is on target.
- 4.2 Comments on a draft hybrid working policy for staff will be sought from the Knowledge Manager and Senior Leadership Team before consulting staff.

Feedback from managers and staff indicates that the idea of hybrid blended working is acceptable with staff attending the office for collaborative working, learning and development and to meet up with colleagues.

- 4.3 The Agile Working Policy and Right to Disconnect Guidance will be incorporated into the new Hybrid Working Policy.
- 4.4 Good progress is continuing in terms of training. It is anticipated that Dignity at Work training will take place at the end of March/early April.
- 4.5 HR are planning to run a fourth cohort of the Leadership Development Programme along with an alumni event for the previous cohorts.
- 4.6 Another area of focus is the staff health and wellbeing survey. While the response rate of 46% was disappointing the main feedback indicated that staff appreciate the lunchtime talks and have enjoyed the step challenge. The main reasons given for not participating were topics not being relevant and a small percentage of staff said they didn't have time.
- 4.7 Results from the recent EDI survey indicate that staff are confident in talking to a mental health first aider, line manager or colleague about mental health. Internally there is a focus on promoting the Agency's mental health first aiders and highlighting their role particularly during the induction process for new staff. The Committee will be updated on progress.
- 4.8 Activities being planned for Wellbeing Week (28 March 2022) include health assessments by Chest Heart & Stroke NI; reflexology and seated acupuncture massage treatments delivered by The Wellbeing Company NI. A podcast by CHS about heart health is also being explored. HR are also working along with the Agency's charity partner for 2022 regarding events they have organised for the year.
- 4.9 HR are also focussed on their own efforts to move to a paperless environment. Some extra resource is available to assist with this.

HR Metrics

- 4.10 The Committee noted the HR Metrics (paper FP02-02/22).
- 4.11 The Committee noted the rise in absence which is possibly due to the time of year.

4.12 Lee Wilson asked if agile leadership training would be suitable for Board members. HR will be sourcing training in agile working and an update will be provided to the Committee in due course.

Action: HR Managers

4.13 It was noted that some staff feel isolation and a lack of peer support working from home. The Senior Leadership Team have discussed proposals for a pilot hybrid working scheme to encourage staff to spend half their working week in the office. The SLT are keen to find an equilibrium on the right amount of time to come into the office to connect with new colleagues and to address wellbeing and learning and development needs. The scheme will be subject to consultation with TUS and colleagues.

4.14 The Chief Executive provided an update around EDI developments since the last meeting. The Agency's submission for Diversity Mark Bronze Award was submitted at the end of January; outcome expected by 1 March. The application sets a fairly ambitious target around gender diversity. As part of this work a Women's Network has been established which Jill Minne, Board member, has agreed to mentor. There has been a high level of interest from colleagues in joining the network. One issue will be around sexual harassment and what is acceptable behaviour in the workplace. The Chief Executive will be meeting his counterpart in Acas next week to discuss their experiences.

4.15 There was clear agreement from ERG that the Agency's current values should reflect diversity and inclusion more explicitly. This will be discussed at the Board workshop on 24 February.

4.16 Regarding transformation, a coaching culture for managers and leaders along with outline proposals regarding future plans for restructuring. Terms of reference for an accompanying process review are currently with TUS for consultation. It is anticipated that any restructuring will not take place until next year.

4.17 Michelle McGinley commended the HR team for their consultation with staff, seeking feedback and moving with the times and changes in peoples' viewpoints. She emphasised the importance of GDPR in moving to a paperless environment.

4.18 The Chair thanked the HR Manager for her update.

5. ICT Matters

5.1 The IT Manager reported that notice had been served on the current IT provider that the Agency was terminating contract at end January. Development work on one area of the portal for representatives remains outstanding since mid-

December but the provider expects to complete this within two weeks. The Agency also awaits the handover of software code files.

- 5.2 As of 1 February the new provider is responsible for supporting the system and a more cost effective framework is now in place to take work forward.
- 5.3 On delivery of IS Managed Services some services are now being provided out of the Regional Office with the remainder in the process of being migrated.
- 5.4 In response to a query from Lee Wilson, the Chief Executive confirmed that the Finance & Personnel Committee has an advisory role whereas assurance is provided to the Board through the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee.
- 5.5 The Chair thanked the IT Manager for his update.

6. Communications Matters

- 6.1 In the absence of the Communications Manager an update was provided by the Director of Corporate Services.
- 6.2 The Agency awaits further announcements from the Executive Office about covid regulations. It is hoped to be in a position to formally launch the hybrid working guidance next week.
- 6.3 The Communications Manager is collating responses from the recent Board stakeholder mapping exercise conducted by Morrows.
- 6.4 The Communications Manager is progressing the launch of the online Document Review Toolkit.
- 6.5 A communications framework has been drafted for consultation with SMT, ERG and TUS. Communication with staff has been positive throughout lockdown but it will be important going into hybrid working not to create a two tier workforce. This is a critical piece of work in terms of engagement and having processes in place for meaningful feedback and ensuring this is done in a structured way that can be evaluated and improved upon. Committee views will be sought on the framework.

Action: Communications Manager
- 6.6 Lee Wilson asked about Board/staff communications. The HR Manager reported that discussions with Board members had raised the question of Board/staff communication. A recommendation on this will be included in a report scheduled for the March Board meeting. The Chair commented that this was an interesting piece of work which the Committee looked forward to receiving.

- 6.7 In response to a decline in calls to the WIS team the Communications Manager is undertaking promotional work arising awareness on social media.
- 6.8 A promotional piece of work is also underway highlighting the work of the Economic Development Team.
- 6.9 The Chief Executive and Communications Manager met with representatives from the Rainbow Project to discuss outreach work with the LGBTQ+ community. The Agency has agreed to create a video to share with members of the LGBTQ+ and to share social media posts.
- 6.10 The Chief Executive reported on a positive meeting with the DfE's Careers Service which has signposted other potential partners to raise awareness of employment rights among young people.
- 6.11 The Chair asked about communication with minority ethnic communities. Partnership work is ongoing with African & Caribbean Support Northern Ireland (ACSONI) to raise awareness of employment rights and responsibilities. The Knowledge Manager has recorded a podcast for ACSONI on grievances. Contact is also being made with the Chinese Welfare Community in NI to raise awareness of the Agency's services. In relation to the eastern European population the Chief Executive reported that in the past work was done with CAB and their migrant team.
- 6.12 The Chair thanked the Director of Corporate Services for his update.

7. Business Support Matters

- 7.1 The Business Support Manager provided an update on Customer Service Excellence (CSE). Evidence is being gathered for reassessment in March and will be submitted in due course. A staff satisfaction survey will run next week in terms of services provided to staff as internal customers.
- 7.2 Questionnaires have been prepared for issue at end March to capture feedback from all those who have used services in the last year. Surveys were done previously in 2015.
- 7.3 Official Statistics –OBA work feeds into the official statistics. The Business Support Manager and IT Manager attended a seminar for lead officials setting out requirements. The Director of Corporate Services and Communications Manager will be attending an information seminar in early March.
- 7.4 The Chair thanked the Business Support Manager for her update.

8. Knowledge Management

- 8.1 The Knowledge Manager provided an update highlighting the following areas.
- 8.2 EDI work – the Knowledge Manager is working closely with the staff EDI Champion in delivering unconscious bias training for all staff. Staff are completely engaged and very keen to become involved. Committee members were in favour of recommending unconscious bias training for Board members. The taster sessions will be followed by more formal training.
- 8.3 Weekly updates covering general relevant news, summary of significant cases and training are well received by staff. Part of the news is letting staff know what is happening in other sections. Staff are also proactive in contributing to the weekly updates. The Knowledge Manager thanked Michelle McGinley for sharing information.
- 8.4 Training was also provided for Business Support Service (BST) staff on raising awareness and understanding around early conciliation. Feedback from staff was positive.
- 8.5 The Knowledge Manager reported that in an effort to maximise output she has sent out a call to staff for working groups to work on particular areas such as holidays and holiday pay and the advice to be given.
- 8.6 The Knowledge Manager co-chairs the Mental Health First Aiders and Dignity at Work Advisers both supporting the core work the Agency is doing, contributing suggestions to HR and in turn being supported by them. Dignity at Work training was well received and refresher training for the Mental Health First Aiders is taking place. The Knowledge Manager and Board Mental Health Champion to discuss recognition of the role.
- 8.7 The Chair thanked the Knowledge Manager for her report and congratulated her on her work to date which was proving a useful resource for staff and has demonstrated the value of the role.
- 8.8 The Director of Corporate Services commended Patricia for progressing this work while also being flexible in supporting other colleagues.

9. Accommodation Matters

- 9.1 The DCS provided an update on accommodation matters.
- 9.2 The Accommodation Project Manager had provided a very comprehensive presentation to the Board in January outlining progress to date on all work streams, key dates and tasks.
- 9.3 Staff have been advised of the deadline date of 1 March 2022 for clear out of desks, personal belongings and all paperwork.
- 9.4 Additional resource will be brought in to support relocation efforts and staff have been offered additional hours and overtime to support this.
- 9.5 The Accommodation Project Manager continues to regularly convene project team meetings and was encouraged that everything remains on track from the Agency's perspective. However, there is a possibility of delays in the readiness of James House as a sub-contractor has ceased trading. The construction team are planning to retender but there is no confirmation of the extent of any delays. The Senior Leadership Team and Accommodation Project Manager have been considering possible contingencies around this.
- 9.6 Following Board approval not to exercise the break clause for the current Regional Office premises the Agency will remain in Richmond Chambers until June 2024.
- 9.7 The Chief Executive reported that in light of a possible delay in relocation he is focused on the critical risk of having to give notice to the Landlord on 28 February to vacate the Gordon Street premises at the end of May. There is a possibility of incurring additional costs by extending the lease on Gordon Street lease which would add pressure to finances. The Chief Executive will engage with the Board and ARAC.

Action: Chief Executive
- 9.8 Committee members expressed concern at a possible delay and the impact of the sub-contractor ceasing to trade. The Chief Executive said the Agency would pursue DoF for funds if any additional costs were incurred.
- 9.9 The Chair thanked the Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Services for their update.

10. Any Other Business

- 10.1 The Chair thanked everyone for their contribution to the meeting.

11. Date of Next Meeting

11.1 The next meeting will be on 3 May 2022 at 10.00am.