

NORTHERN IRELAND FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE BOARD

MINUTES OF A MEETING

20 DECEMBER 2011

12.00 NOON

PRESENT: Dr J McKee, Chairman presiding
Cllr D Barbour
Mr J Barbour
Cllr M Carr
Mrs S Grant
Mr A Hanna
Ald A Hatch
Mr M Kerr
Mr C Mack
Ald Mrs G Rice

APOLOGIES: Mr P Craig, Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive
Mrs P Tally

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr C Kerr, Deputy Chief Fire Officer
Mr E Doyle, Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Support Services)
Mr T McGonigal, Director of Finance & Performance
Management
Dr D Michail, Director of Planning & Corporate Affairs
Mrs M Hughes, Head of HR
Mrs C McNally, Corporate Communications Manager
Mrs I Hill, Board Administrative Secretary
Mrs H Robinson, DHSSPS

1 Apologies

Apologies were noted.

2 Declaration of Interests

The Chair sought clarification as to whether any Members of the Board wished to declare any potential conflict of interest with any of the Business Items on the Agenda. Members confirmed that there were no conflicts of interest.

3 Minutes – 22 November 2011

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 22 November 2011, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read and signed as a true record, on the motion of Mr Kerr, seconded by Mr Carr.

Arising out of the Minutes:

New Omagh Fire Station

The Director of Planning & Corporate Affairs informed Members that he expected planning approval for the new Omagh Fire Station on 6 January 2012.

Assessment & Development Centre Update

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer advised Members that the process with respect to the Assessment & Development Centre anomaly remained ongoing and there was no further progress to report currently.

Change in the Order of Business

It was agreed to take Item 5 – Chairman’s Business – as the next Item of Business.

5 Chairman’s Business

Corporate Management Team

The Chairman advised Members of the arrangements for covering the Chief Fire Officer’s post and in his absence, wished the Chief Fire Officer well in his recovery on behalf of the Board.

The Chairman welcomed Mrs Marina Hughes to the Meeting and explained that Mrs Hughes will be fulfilling the role of Head of HR.

Investigation – Whistleblowing Allegations

The Chairman gave Members an update with respect to the current position in relation to the investigation being conducted by DHSSPS internal Auditors into whistleblowing allegations.

Fraud Investigation

Members noted that the ‘fact-finding’ investigation relating to an alleged anomaly in a number of overtime claims was complete and a report from the Business Services Organisation was now awaited.

NIAO Report

Members noted the NIAO Report – Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service: An Organisational Assessment and Review of Departmental Oversight – had been published today, a copy of which was circulated to Members for their consideration.

The Chairman welcomed the NIAO Report and noted that there were 5 broad recommendations, and other issues, identified within the Report. He explained that the Deputy Chief Fire Officer had met with DHSSPS representatives and an Action Plan had been agreed.

Members noted that the Report would require Board consideration in the New Year and further noted that work on the recommendations/issues identified within the Report was progressing.

The Chairman expressed his disappointment with respect to elements of the Report and Press Release particularly in regard to the negative tone used.

The Corporate Communications Manager gave Members a brief overview of the media coverage that morning relating to the publication of the Report.

Mr Hanna reflected on some of that morning's media coverage and commended the Corporate Communications Manager on the briefing which she had circulated to Members which was very useful. He explained that he had re-read the draft NIAO Report and whilst he accepted there were some areas for consideration, there had also been substantial achievements over the past year.

Mr D Barbour echoed Mr Hanna's comments with respect to the significant progress attained and stated that it was disappointing that this was not reflected within the Report.

The Chairman highlighted that the Report had also reviewed the supervision and support given to NIFRS by DHSSPS.

National Joint Council Matters

The Chairman reported on the business discussed at a recent NJC Meeting. He informed Members that the Fire Brigades' Union continued to voice concerns about the ongoing pay freeze and the implications for its Members and its grave concern over changes to Firefighters' pensions.

Post of Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Director of Safety Services)

The Chairman referred to the vacant post of Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Director of Safety Services) and informed Members that, following discussion with the Head of HR, the Appointments Panel had been agreed as follows:

Dr J McKee, Chairman of Panel;
Mr D Barbour;
Mrs S Grant;
Mr C Mack; and
Mrs P Tally.

Members noted that shortlisting was scheduled to take place on 9 January 2012. It was also noted that presentations were scheduled to take place on 24 January 2012 and this would require the participation of another Board Member outside of the Appointments Panel. Following a request from the Chairman, Mr Carr agreed to facilitate this section of the selection process. Members were informed that it was anticipated interviews would be held week commencing 30 January 2012.

Training – 7 February 2012

The Chairman reminded Members that Risk Management training for all Members would be held on 7 February 2012.

Notice of Retirement

The Chairman informed the Meeting that Dr D Michail, Director of Planning & Corporate Affairs had given notice of his intention to retire at the end of March 2012.

He wished Dr Michail well in his plans for retirement and paid tribute to his contribution to NIFRS and the work of the Organisation.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer, on behalf of the Corporate Management Team, shared the Chairman's sentiments.

Post of Director of Human Resources

Mrs Rice sought an update with respect to the vacant post of Director of Human Resources.

The Head of HR outlined the current position, explaining that, although the Job Description for the post was currently with Belfast City Council for a desktop evaluation, a Job Evaluation questionnaire also required to be completed. Members noted that this questionnaire had now been completed and would be forwarded to Belfast City Council that day.

Mrs Rice questioned the timeframe for progressing the matter especially given the post of Director of Human Resources was a key strategic role within the Organisation. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that the need for the post to undergo a Job Evaluation accounted for the delay but assured Members that the matter was progressing.

Mr Hatch referred to the update given at the Meeting of the Service Delivery & Performance Committee on 29 November 2011, ie, Director of Human Resources post – desktop evaluation being undertaken; Director of Safety Services documentation finalised, advertisement scheduled for 12 December 2012 and questioned the lack of progress.

The Head of HR informed Members that the post of Director of Safety Services had been advertised and the closing date for applications was 5 January 2012. She stated that it was anticipated that the post of Director of Human Resources would be advertised in January.

Mrs Rice reiterated that the post was a key role and stressed the need for the matter to be closely monitored.

Chairman's Activities

The Chairman's Quarterly Review: October to December 2011 was circulated at the Meeting for the information of Members.

End of Year Thanks

The Chairman expressed his appreciation to the Board Members for their support over the year.

On behalf of the Board, he thanked the Principal Officers and Directors for the significant work achieved especially given the levels of scrutiny. He also paid tribute to the professionalism of NIFRS staff and asked that the Board's thanks be extended to frontline Firefighters, RCC staff, all NIFRS Support staff and the wider NIFRS 'family'.

He referred to the regular contact with DHSSPS and expressed his appreciation to Mr N McCann, Mrs H Robinson and staff within the Public Safety Unit.

The Chairman also thanked the Board Administrative Secretary and the Chief Executive's Department for all their work.

4 Reports from Board Committees, including adoption of Committee Minutes

Service Delivery & Performance Committee Meeting – 29 November 2011

Mr Hatch, Chairman of the Service Delivery & Performance Committee, gave Members a synopsis of the Business discussed at the Meeting held on 29 November 2011 which had included the Annual Business Plan 2011/12 – 6-Monthly Progress Report; NIFRS Performance Report April to September 2011; Draft NIFRS Consultation Strategy 2011-16 & Annual Consultation Plan 2011/12; and updates on Fire Safety Legislation and Health & Safety.

He also gave Members an overview of the updates which the Deputy Chief Fire Officer had given the Committee with respect to the vacant senior posts; Wholetime recruitment; uniformed promotions; Regional Control Centre; and Retained recruitment/promotions.

Mr J Barbour referred to the update relating to Retained recruitment/promotions and expressed his concern that progress in this area may need to await the appointment of the Director of Human Resources. He pointed out that a Director of Human Resources had not been necessary to progress Wholetime recruitment and promotions nor the vacant senior posts and questioned why this was not the case with respect to Retained. He highlighted the level of back-ups required by Retained personnel and sought assurance as to the need for a Director of Human Resources to be in position before progressing Retained recruitment/promotions.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer explained that it was not just the issue of Retained recruitment and promotions but a totality of issues pertaining to Retained personnel, eg, Retained Contracts, hence the need for a Director of Human Resources to be in position.

The Chairman reminded Members that the Deputy Chief Fire Officer and Assistant Chief Fire Officer Doyle were currently sustaining the Principal Officers' rota and acknowledged the level of work undertaken by all the Directors. He commended the work of Mrs A Davidson who had just completed 4 months covering the role of Head of HR.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer referred to the HR Strategy and noted the work associated with implementing the Strategy and ensuring matters were progressed. He highlighted to Members the level of commitment required by Senior Management over the next 3 months in terms of progressing recruitment and stressed that key dependencies were being addressed. He also pointed out the need for Area Commanders and Group Commanders to be appointed and in place in order to move forward.

Mr J Barbour acknowledged the Deputy Chief Fire Officer's comments but reiterated the need to address Retained recruitment and promotions.

The Chairman referred to the update on Wholetime recruitment and noted that the exercise was on target for 36 Trainees to commence 30 January 2012. He thanked Assistant Chief Fire Officer Doyle and his team for their work in progressing Wholetime recruitment.

Audit & Risk Management Committee Meeting – 5 December 2011

Mrs Rice gave a report on a joint audit visit she had conducted in Eastern Area Command along with the Deputy Chief Fire Officer. She advised Members that she had been very impressed with the SMAP (Station Management Assurance Programme) process she had observed.

She acknowledged that the Deputy Chief Fire Officer had recently implemented this Scheme across all Areas in NIFRS as part of the Operations Management Framework.

As Chairman of the Audit & Risk Management Committee, Mrs Rice gave Members a brief overview of the Business discussed at the Meeting held on 5 December 2011, including Audit Report on Stores & PPE; Interim HIA Internal Audit Assurance Statement; Risk Register and Interim Statement on Internal Control and Fraud Report detailing suspected cases for the year to date.

Mrs Rice informed Members that the Committee had also received an update on the position of incorrect Pension Transfer valuations provided by Capita Hartshead. She informed the Meeting that NIFRS were concerned with the slow progress made in resolving errors and explained that the Committee proposed to notify the Pensions Regulator should there be any further significant delay in resolving complaints by Capita. She stated that the Board would be kept informed.

She advised Members that the Terms of Reference for the Audit & Risk Management Committee were being revisited and benchmarked against Treasury Guidance.

Referring to the opening and evaluation of Tenders, Mrs Rice pointed out the importance of the Board being involved in this process and explained that the Committee had requested that consideration be given to the appropriate Board Member involvement.

Following discussion, it was agreed that a Board Member be present at the opening of Tenders above £50,000.

6 Chief Fire Officer's Business

The Report on the Chief Fire Officer's Business for the month of November 2011 was noted.

7 Standalone Strategic Items

Code of Procedures on Recruitment & Selection

Members noted the revised NIFRS Code of Procedures on Recruitment & Selection.

The Head of HR explained that the Code had been reviewed to reflect best practice and ensure compliance with current employment legislation including the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland's Codes of Practice. She gave Members an overview of the key changes within the document.

During discussion, the Chairman proposed an amendment to Section 14 - Review of the Code, ie, that the Code be reviewed every 3 years. This was agreed.

The Board, on the motion of Mr J Barbour, seconded by Mrs Rice, unanimously –

Resolved: “to approve the revised NIFRS Code of Procedures on Recruitment & Selection subject to amendments.”

Contract Approvals

Members were reminded that, at the last Board Meeting, a paper setting out a new process for the scrutiny of contracts by the Board had been requested by the Members.

Members noted a Memorandum from the Director of Planning & Corporate Affairs in relation to the Board's role in the award of Contracts and setting out proposals for an additional overseeing role, ie:

- All Contracts above £60,000 to have a Board Member act as Chair of the Evaluation Panel (excluding Members of the Audit & Risk Management Committee and the Board Chairman) with the recommendation of the Panel being implemented with immediate effect;
- All Contract award recommendations with a value greater than the current EU Public Sector threshold will be referred to the Board Finance Committee (or a nominated Sub-Committee of the Finance Committee) to accept or reject the recommendation of the Evaluation Panel.

Mrs Rice proposed that the value of contracts requiring Board involvement should be above £50,000. This was agreed.

The Board, on the motion of Mrs Rice, seconded by Mr Kerr, unanimously –

Resolved: “to implement the aforementioned proposals for an additional over-seeing role by the Board in the award of all Contracts above £50,000, with effect from 1 January 2012”.

Scheme of Delegation

The draft NIFRS Scheme of Delegation was circulated at the Meeting for the consideration of Members.

The Director of Finance & Performance Management explained that the draft Scheme had been developed based on model guidance provided by DHSSPS. He further explained that the document was a working draft circulated to Members for comments/suggestions prior to discussion at the January Board Meeting.

8 Relevant Correspondence

The following relevant correspondence was noted:

Letter of appreciation from CFOA and CLG acknowledging NIFRS contribution to national exercises and resilience.

9 Sealing of Documents

Members noted the undernoted documents for sealing:

Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service with:

David F Smyth – Renewal of Lease – Office Accommodation, 30 Fairhill Road, Cookstown;

Renault UK Limited – Crew Cab Vans; and

Superspares Parts Limited – Garage Sundries.

10 Any Other Business

Contract for Media Services

Mrs Rice sought an update with regard to the award of the Contract for Media Services.

The Director of Finance & Performance Management outlined the current position explaining that the process had been suspended.

The Corporate Communications Manager assured Members that in the interim NIFRS continued to meet its statutory obligation in terms of community safety.

Mrs Rice emphasised the requirement for Members to be involved in the award of the Contract.

NIAO Report

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer referred to the publication of the NIAO Report, previously reported in the Meeting, and assured Members that work was underway to address the issues emanating from the Report.

Briefing Note

A Deputy Chief Fire Officer's Briefing Note updating Members on the IRMP Consultation, Operational Performance and giving a summary of progress attained by the Service Improvement Team was circulated for the information of Members.

Budget Position

The Chairman referred to NIFRS current budget position and expressed concern regarding the levels of underspends within expenditure profiles and stressed the importance of addressing this issue.

The Director of Finance & Performance Management explained that there were variances within the profiles and stated that it will be necessary to discuss the year-end strategies with DHSSPS.

Mr Kerr pointed out the need to agree a date for the Special Meeting to discuss NIFRS budgets and reiterated the need to ensure the timely completion and approval of Business Cases.

It was provisionally agreed that a Special Meeting be convened on 17 January 2012.

11 Schedule of Future Meetings

Members noted a Schedule of Future Meetings of the Board and its Committees.

THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS
AND THE MEETING TERMINATED
AT 1.05 PM
