

NORTHERN IRELAND FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE BOARD

MINUTES OF A MEETING

25 SEPTEMBER 2012

1.30 PM

PRESENT: Dr J McKee, Chairman presiding
Mr C Kerr, Interim Chief Fire Officer
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
Mrs P Tally

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr J Wallace, Interim Chief Executive
Mr D Ashford, Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Safety Services)
Mr T McGonigal, Director of Finance & Performance
Management
Mrs A Davidson, Head of HR
Mrs C McNally, Corporate Communications Manager
Mrs I Hill, Board Administrative Secretary
Mr D Jordan, DHSSPS

Prior to the commencement of Business, the Chairman informed Members of the death of Retained Firefighter Sean Maginn, Rathfriland. The Meeting observed a minute's silence as a mark of respect.

Item 1: Apologies

There were no apologies.

Item 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.

Item 3: Minutes – 31 August 2012

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 31 August 2012, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read and signed as a true record, subject to a minor amendment, on the motion of Mr Kerr, seconded by Mr D Barbour.

Item 4: Reports from Board Committees, including adoption of Committee Minutes

There have been no Meetings of Board Committees since the last Board Meeting.

The Chairman explained that a Special Meeting of the Finance Committee would be convened at the end of the Board Meeting.

Item 5: Chairman's Business (including National Joint Council Matters)

Operations

The Chairman expressed his appreciation to Area Commander McClintock and frontline personnel who responded to the recent farm deaths at Hillsborough. He also expressed his appreciation to Assistant Group Commanders Joyce and Bigger following the display of drones' potential at Portrush Airshow and to the Interim Chief Fire Officer and senior staff following a maritime exercise on 23 September 2012.

National Joint Council

Members noted that the next Meeting of the National Joint Council was scheduled to take place on 4 October 2012.

The Chairman gave Members a brief update on the Police and Fire Reform in Scotland, including the setting-up of the new Fire & Rescue Service Board. He commented on his involvement in the exercise which had been a valuable learning experience.

External Reports

The Chairman referred to the Review of Alleged Irregularities at NIFRS, based on whistleblower allegations, and advised Members that it was anticipated that the DHSSPS reports relating to the whistleblower allegations and the review of the Wholetime recruitment exercise would be published mid October. He explained that the Corporate Management Team would be working through the recommendations and developing an Action Plan in response to same. He further explained that all recommendations would be taken forward through a Change Management Programme for the Organisation. The Board would provide input to the proposed comprehensive programme of change management.

Mrs Rice commented that she felt that Members should have sight of the Reports prior to their publication.

The Chairman referred to discussions with DHSSPS and explained that, in light of recent 'leaks' it was proposed that the Reports be electronically distributed to Members the morning of their release.

Mr J Barbour supported the proposal and advised Members of the Fire Brigades' Union's position with respect to these 'leaks' explaining that the Union had formally requested an investigation.

The Chairman assured Members that the issue of management of information had been raised with DHSSPS.

It was agreed that copies of the Whistleblowing Report and Report on Review of Wholetime Recruitment Exercise would be electronically distributed to Members the morning of their release.

In response to a question from Mrs Rice in relation to the notes taken at Meetings by the DHSSPS observer, the Chairman confirmed that he received copies of the notes taken by the DHSSPS observer at Board/Committee Meetings. He undertook to ascertain who receives copies of those notes.

Potential Easements

The Chairman noted that updates on key projects such as GD92 and PBI Gold, would be provided later in the Meeting.

Firefighter Recruitment

Members noted that it was anticipated that the Report on the Review of the Wholetime Recruitment Exercise would be published mid October.

At this point,
Mr Hatch entered the Meeting

Key Posts/Staffing Issues

Members noted that the Interim Chief Fire Officer was addressing the issue of interim Principal Officer cover.

With respect to the vacant post of Director of Planning & Corporate Affairs, the Chairman informed Members that the vacancy would be advertised on 2 October 2012 and it was hoped that the successful candidate would be in post in January 2013.

At this point,
the Head of HR left the Meeting

The Chairman referred to the vacant post of Director of Human Resources and the Interim Chief Executive updated Members on progress.

In response to Members' questions, the Interim Chief Fire Officer stated that the Members of the Interview Panel would remain unchanged, however, in light of the legal advice obtained, it would be necessary to change the make-up of the Panel for the re-run of the Assessment Centre.

Mr D Barbour sought clarification as to whether the need for these posts had been established. The Interim Chief Executive assured Members that there was a clear need for the posts to be filled and gave Members an overview of work currently ongoing to provide resilience within the Corporate Management Team. He also advised Members that the Corporate Management Team would be considering the structure going forward, working from the top down to ensure that the support function was more closely aligned to service delivery.

The Chairman highlighted that the posts had been advertised with the caveat that the Job Descriptions were under review.

At this point,
the Head of HR rejoined the Meeting

Stations/Resources/Personnel

The Chairman and other Members commented on their attendance at the Long Service and Good Conduct Medal Ceremony which had been held on 22 September 2012.

The Chairman reported positively on his recent visit to Ballycastle Fire Station during the Station's Operational Assurance Audit. He referred to the Schedule of Audits which had been forwarded to Members and encouraged their attendance. He asked Members to be cognisant of the Guidance Notes issued in respect of such visits. Members to advise the Board Administrative Secretary as soon as possible of any Stations they may wish to visit.

Mr J Barbour referred to concerns previously identified with respect to the raising of public expectation in relation to new builds. He referred in particular to recent publicity regarding Ballymena and reiterated his concern that NIFRS were continuing to create unrealistic expectations and, whilst acknowledging the difficulty given the lack of a Director of Planning, stressed the need to address the matter and take measures to cease the misdirection of public expectations.

During discussion in relation to NIFRS new build programme, the Director of Finance & Performance Management highlighted that the Corporate Management Team had acknowledged the need to consider the structure within the Estates Department particularly given the absence of the Director of Planning and also a Strategic Planning Manager. He added the need to develop an Estates Strategy had also been acknowledged by the Corporate Management Team and discussed with Health Estates.

The Interim Chief Executive noted Members' comments and stated that it had been approximately 7 years since a condition survey of NIFRS estate was completed and explained that work was ongoing to identify NIFRS priorities. Members noted that this included the backlog of maintenance alongside refurbishment/rebuild requirements. The Officers pointed out the need to update the Estates survey and consider same in conjunction with NIFRS IRMP which would provide a map for the way forward for the Organisation.

The Interim Chief Fire Officer updated Members on progress to date with respect to FSEC, a toolkit to quantify and analyse NIFRS data to create a comprehensive risk profile of Northern Ireland explaining that the 2011 Census data had not been released as yet. He reminded Members FSEC would provide an integrated approach to the risk assessment of our community and to allocate resources based on an agreed empiric model. Members noted that a province-wide profile would not be completed for 12 months.

The Interim Chief Fire Officer referred members to the Operational Management Framework and assured Members operational performance continues to be measured and monitored. He highlighted that work was currently being undertaken to develop an Operational Risk Management Strategy and that a gap analysis had been conducted to identify resources/response options. He also informed Members of the development of a Rural Support Strategy to assist NIFRS in meeting its Emergency Response Standards.

During further discussion with respect to NIFRS capital programme, Members reiterated the need to address public expectation and to develop a 5-year strategy as the previous 10-year ISNI plan was not deliverable due to funding constraints.

Members agreed that measures be put in place now to manage expectations, public and political, with respect to NIFRS capital programme and to obviate unnecessary planning applications, etc, being progressed.

Official Opening of Rathfriland Fire Station

Members noted that the Official Opening of Rathfriland Fire Station, which was scheduled to take place on 6 October 2012, has been postponed due to the sudden death of a member of the Rathfriland Crew.

Retained Recruitment

The Chairman noted that NIFRS will be progressing Retained recruitment.

Staff Support - Desertcreat/WPFG 2013 Projects

The Chairman noted that Assistant Chief Fire Officer Ashford was collating information to identify NIFRS requirements in respect of the Desertcreat and WPFG 2013 projects.

LIFE Schemes

The Chairman informed Members that a review of LIFE Schemes had been completed and Assistant Chief Fire Officer Ashford explained to Members that subsequently the format for the Schemes would be changing.

Members noted that a LIFE Scheme Graduation was scheduled to take place on 28 September 2012 at Westland Fire Station.

NIFRS Strategic Direction

The Chairman acknowledged that Members' annual performance assessments had been positive but pointed out the need to keep reviewing Board Members' training needs. He noted training which had been undertaken by Members to date and welcomed Members' suggestions for further training. The Chairman outlined his ideas for training including the possibility of sharing good practice with Scottish Fire & Rescue Services as a training exercise.

Mrs Rice referred to the Strategic Planning Day held earlier in the year and emphasised the need to follow-up that Planning Day as agreed as strategic direction was a key issue of the Board.

The Chairman explained the need for the Board to focus on strategic direction. He accepted that Members were frustrated dealing with legacy issues and issues arising. The Chairman suggested the possibility, in the future, of fewer full Board Meetings but proportionately more Committee Meetings. He pointed out the need to ensure that the Board's Committees are performing their scrutiny role and for Members to trust the Standing Committees to bring forward recommendations to the Board and to allow the Board to focus on strategy.

The Chairman suggested that the Board Agenda would consider strategic issues around matters such as Community Safety; NIFRS response role and service delivery; Performance Management including Value for Money; partnership working; benchmarking, in particular NIFRS KPIs against its Cross-Border counterparts, etc.

Mrs Rice referred to the Chairman's comments regarding the Committees' scrutiny role and outlined her concerns with respect to the level of information and reports presented to the Committees. She asked that Members' information needs be considered alongside the Committee structure.

The Chairman noted Mrs Rice's comments and asked the Interim Chief Executive to consider the Board's information needs.

Mr Hanna suggested that given the Board was half way through its term of office, it may be opportune to also look at the membership of Committees.

Referring to partnership working, the Interim Chief Fire Officer outlined the background to a partnership arrangement with SOS Charity explaining that as NIFRS is not permitted to make cash contributions to a charity, the SOS Charity is allowed to house its vehicle on NIFRS premises and had access to NIFRS fuel supplies. He explained that as the Scheme of Delegation no longer applies, to continue with the current arrangement, Board and Departmental approval would be required. The Interim Chief Fire Officer stated that the arrangement with this Charity was a true example of partnership working and advised Members that he will be presenting a paper to the Corporate Management Team and subsequently the Board with regard to the matter.

Members noted that a Service Level Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding with the SOS Charity was recommended and that an interim arrangement was in place until same had been agreed.

During discussion, the Interim Chief Fire Officer answered Members' questions regarding various aspects of the partnership arrangement.

The Chairman commended the Charity and its work to the Board and reiterated that a paper would be presented at the October Board Meeting.

Referring to the NI Commissioner for Public Appointments' comments regarding the need to encourage a range of people from across the various backgrounds to become involved in the work of Boards, the Chairman outlined his views regarding the possibility of having youth observers at Board Meetings. Members, whilst welcoming NIFRS continuing youth engagement work, expressed their concerns with respect to the proposal in terms of the Boardroom environment.

Assistant Chief Fire Officer Ashford informed Members of initiatives currently being developed within NIFRS as a means for engaging with young people such as work on a Social Media Policy and the introduction of a Prince's Trust programme within NIFRS.

Mrs Tally suggested that the Youth Councils established at local Councils as a potential mechanism for linking-in with young people at a local level.

Item 6: Chief Executive's Business – Directors' Updates

The Chairman referred to the various Directors' Reports which had been circulated to Members in advance of the Board Meeting and asked the Directors to highlight any significant issues for the information of Members.

Director of Finance & Performance Management

The Director of Finance & Performance Management gave Members an overview of the salient points from the Management Accounts for the period ending 31 August 2012. He highlighted in particular that due to the current Management Accounts position it was agreed by the Corporate Management Team that a Revenue easement of £250k would be declared in the September/October monitoring round. Members noted that this adjustment will be reflected in the September Management Accounts.

The Director of Finance & Performance Management referred Members to the Revenue Budget Risk Register and noted the projects identified with red/amber risk ratings. Members noted the current position in respect of the Business Case for PBI Gold, ie, the Business Case had been revised to reflect DHSSPS comments and would be forwarded to DHSSPS as soon as possible. He also highlighted the need for staffing budgets to be approved for the WPF 2013 and Desertcreat projects.

Referring to the Capital position, the Director of Finance & Performance Management gave Members an overview of the current position. He informed Members that the Corporate Management Team had agreed to declare a Capital easement of £400k in the September/October monitoring round. With respect to the GD92 project, he explained that the budget for this project had been re-profiled due to the difficulties of NIFRS not having the services of a CoPE.

During discussion in relation to the need for NIFRS to have the services of a CoPE, the Interim Chief Fire Officer outlined to Members the current procurement position due to the non CoPE position and gave Members a detailed overview of the impact of this position on progressing key NIFRS projects. Members expressed concern regarding the current procurement position, its impact on the progress of key projects such as the GD92 project and the Retained Availability System and the potential for further slippage. Mr J Barbour stressed the need to find a way forward.

The Interim Chief Executive shared Members' concerns. He pointed out that there were issues on both sides and assured Members that NIFRS were starting to address those issues from its aspect and to move issues forward. He also informed Members of discussions with DHSSPS in respect of utilising a local 'Centre of Procurement Excellence' (CoPE). He explained that the issue is that NIFRS can utilise existing Contracts from a CoPE, but they will not generate new tenders specifically requested by NIFRS.

Members outlined their frustrations with the continuing difficulties associated with procurement processes and in particular the current procurement constraints, Mr Hatch suggested that a delegation from the Board meet with the Health Committee.

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At this point,
Mr Hanna left the Meeting

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The Chairman and Officers reiterated that discussions were ongoing with DHSSPS regarding the procurement difficulties.

Following further discussion, Members unanimously agreed that, with respect to current procurement constraints, a meeting be sought with the Health Committee and, in acknowledging that discussions are ongoing with DHSSPS, also agreed that the Chairman and Interim Chief Executive to advise of timing.

Director of Operations

Members noted the Report from the Director of Operations. The Interim Chief Fire Officer gave Members an overview of the information presented and answered Members' questions in relation to aspects of the information presented.

Planning & Corporate Affairs Directorate

The Interim Chief Executive gave Members an overview of the salient points within the report relating to the Planning & Corporate Affairs Directorate.

The Contracts awarded for the month of August 2012 were noted.

The Interim Chief Executive informed Members of discussions regarding Support staff and in particular in relation to interim staffing arrangements for Planning, HR and Estates. Members requested that the details of the interim staffing arrangements for Planning, HR and Estates be circulated to the Board.

Director of Safety Services

Members noted the Director of Safety Services' Report and Assistant Chief Fire Officer Ashford drew Members' attention to the salient issues which included a further explanation regarding the current position in relation to the GD92 project and the Media Services Tender. He referred Members to Fire Safety Week and highlighted that a suite of press releases had been prepared in the absence of Media Services.

Assistant Chief Fire Officer Ashford answered Members' questions regarding the information presented.

Head of HR

Members noted the Report from the Head of HR which highlighted progress to date with respect to the Recruitment & Selection Schedule.

Item 7: Standing Items

NIAO Report – NIFRS Action Plan

Members noted the NIAO Report updated Action Plan as at 10 September 2012.

The Interim Chief Executive outlined discussions with DHSSPS regarding the proposal to subsume any outstanding recommendations into the Change Management Programme for the Organisation. He pointed out that the Action Plan would remain 'live' until a new format has been agreed.

Desertcreat Project

Members noted a Briefing Note updating them on the Desertcreat Project.

It was agreed to defer the presentation by Assistant Chief Fire Officer Ashford and the Capital Projects Manager to the next Meeting.

WPFG 2013

Members noted a Briefing Note pertaining to WPFG 2013.

Assistant Chief Fire Officer Ashford informed Members that he had raised their concerns with regard to WPFG 2013 and advised Members that the Chairman and Chief Executive WPFG 2013 Limited would be content to provide a briefing to the Board.

Assistant Chief Fire Officer Ashford also advised Members that a review to identify NIFRS staffing requirements in respect of both the Desertcreat and WPFG 2013 projects was underway.

At this point
Mr Carr left the Meeting

Item 8: Standalone Strategic Items

Trainee Firefighters Course

The Interim Chief Fire Officer informed Members that the current NIFRS Wholetime establishment level is 896, as at 19 September 2012, against the required level of 917. He explained that NIFRS urgently need to address this shortfall by commencing a Trainee Firefighters Course otherwise overtime will sharply increase, and training and service delivery objectives will be adversely impacted. Members noted that the Corporate Management Team had recommended an intake of up to 24 entrants.

Following discussion, the Board, on the motion of Mr Hatch, seconded by Mr J Barbour, unanimously –

Resolved: **“to commence a Trainee Firefighters Course for up to 24 entrants”.**

Item 9: Relevant Correspondence

There was no relevant correspondence.

Item 10: Sealing of Documents

Members noted the undernoted documents for sealing:

Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service with:

Genesis Advertising – Media Planning and Buying for NIFRS Safety Campaign; and

Graham Asset Management – Provision of Monitoring Programme & Risk Management Assessments to Water Systems in various NIFRS buildings from 1 August 2012 to 31 March 2015.

Item 11: Schedule of Future Meetings

Members noted a schedule of future Meetings and forthcoming events.

THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS
AND THE MEETING TERMINATED
AT 4.30 PM
