

NORTHERN IRELAND FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE BOARD

MINUTES OF A MEETING

30 OCTOBER 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
Ald A Hatch
Mr M Kerr
Ald Mrs G Rice
Mrs P Tally

APOLOGIES: Mrs S Grant
Mr A Hanna
Mr C Mack

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr J Wallace, Interim Chief Executive
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

Item 1: Apologies

Apologies were noted.

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 – 25 September 2012

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 25 September 2012, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read and signed as a true record, subject to minor amendments, on the motion of Mr Hatch, seconded by Mrs Rice.

Arising out of the Minutes:

**Chairman's Business (including National Joint Council Matters)
*Stations/Resources/Personnel***

With respect to NIFRS Capital Programme and the management of public and political expectations, the Board noted that a paper regarding NIFRS capital priorities will be presented in due course.

Mrs Rice referred to a change in reporting requirements in relation to Estates valuations and asked the Director of Finance & Performance Management to check the current position with respect to reporting requirements for NIFRS Estates valuations.

LIFE Schemes

In response to a question from the Chairman, the Interim Chief Fire Officer explained that, whilst the review of the LIFE Scheme had suggested a change to the format of the Scheme, there were no plans to change the number of Schemes delivered by NIFRS, ie, 14 Schemes throughout the year.

Directors' Reports

Director of Finance & Performance Management

Mr Hatch sought an update with respect to the discussions with DHSSPS in relation to current procurement constraints. The Chairman gave Members an overview of the various discussions with DHSSPS.

The Interim Chief Executive explained that not all procurement issues had been resolved, however, the GD92 and PBI Gold projects were now progressing. He stated that DHSSPS will assist NIFRS with the establishment of a CoPE which was a priority for NIFRS going forward.

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

Special Audit & Risk Management Committee - Meeting - 30 October 2012

Members noted that a Special Meeting of the Audit & Risk Management Committee had been held that morning prior to the Board Meeting.

Mrs Rice, Chairman of the Audit & Risk Management Committee, explained that the Special Meeting had been convened to specifically discuss the Self Assessment of Internal Audit. She gave Members a synopsis of the Business discussed as follows:

Internal Audit Self Assessment - the Committee discussed the performance and effectiveness of Internal Audit including matters affecting the Internal Audit Service's independence and objectivity. Members noted that a report would be presented to the Committee in due course.

Wholetime Recruitment Overtime Claims – the Committee agreed that a small cross-functional Group be established to consider each of these claims individually and present an internal investigation report to the Committee identifying those claims which can be processed and seeking approval for payment; and forwarded to DHSSPS for approval under novel and contentious payments. Those claims which fall outside the project Payment Principles or other corporate Policies will have to be considered for potential management action under the Disciplinary Code.

SOS Charity Bus – Members were informed of the current position in relation to the issues identified around the arrangements with the SOS Charity Bus and also in relation to other charity vehicles and noted that the Interim Chief Fire Officer was preparing a report on the matter for the Corporate Management Team and subsequently the Board.

Ombudsman Finding – the Committee was informed of a recent case the Ombudsman found against NIFRS and noted the award made to the individual concerned.

Special Finance Committee – Minutes - 25 September 2012

The Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Finance Committee held on 25 September 2012, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read and signed as a true record and the recommendations contained therein adopted by the Board, on the motion of Mr Carr, seconded by Mrs Tally.

Finance Committee – Meeting – 26 October 2012

Members noted that a Meeting of the Finance Committee had been held on 26 October 2012.

Mr Kerr, Chairman of the Finance Committee, gave Members an overview of the Business discussed which had included the September Management Accounts; Report on a CIPFA Benchmarking Exercise comparing NIFRS performance against our Family Group for the financial year 2010/11; internal Financial Performance Charts & Trends; Overtime Costs; and Indicative Sickness Costs.

Referring to the PBI Gold project, one of the main Revenue Budget Risks, Mr Kerr and the Interim Chief Fire Officer updated Members on the current position explaining that the original suppliers of PBI Gold could not give assurance to NIFRS that they can deliver by 31 March 2013. Mr Kerr further explained that the purchase of PBI Gold could be progressed through an alternative supplier subject to clarification regarding procurement issues.

Following discussion, the Board, on the motion of Mr Carr, seconded by Mrs Rice, unanimously –

Resolved: “that the purchase of PBI Gold be progressed through an alternative supplier subject to clarification being sought regarding procurement issues”.

Mr Kerr informed Members that other main Risks within the Revenue Budget were the need for STA (Single Tender Action) approvals for a number of IT projects, vacant senior posts; the need for Departmental approval for resources requirements for WPFG 2013 and Desertcreat. He highlighted that the Capital Budget was showing an underspend of £230k against profiled budget, the main reason for slippage is the delay in commencement of the Omagh project. He added that the Capital Risk Register had identified a number of projects behind schedule, the key projects being Modular Pods and Combined Heat & Power Units.

The Director of Finance & Performance Management explained that potential easements would need to be declared to DHSSPS and that NIFRS will also need to flag up the need for additional resources next year. Mr Kerr stated that there was no difficulty in declaring any easements provided NIFRS received the necessary budget requirements in the next financial year.

Members noted that the Committee, given the cost of sickness to the Organisation, had asked that the matter be referred to the HR Committee to examine current systems, existing policies, trends, etc, in relation to sickness monitoring.

Service Delivery & Performance Committee – Minutes – 16 October 2012

The Minutes of the Meeting of the Service Delivery & Performance Committee held on 16 October 2012, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read and signed as a true record and the recommendations contained therein adopted by the Board, on the motion of Mr J Barbour, seconded by Mr D Barbour.

Mr Hatch, Chairman of the Service Delivery & Performance Committee, outlined the Business discussed at the Meeting including:

IRMP 6-Month Progress Report – Report noted. Mr Hatch highlighted that Retained availability is a major vulnerability for NIFRS and explained that the introduction of an electronic availability system would assist to mitigate this risk to the Organisation. He added that the Interim Chief Fire Officer had highlighted the impact of procurement issues on operational delivery and timeframes for progressing key projects. He noted that NIFRS had been given approval to proceed with GD92.

Customer Satisfaction Surveys 2011/12 – the 2 Summary Reports received by the Committee presented a very positive picture of the Organisation's performance.

Fire Safety Legislation – the Committee received an update on Fire Safety matters and it was noted that NIFRS had been formally designated as partners in the Policing & Community Safety Partnerships (PCSP).

Mr Hatch informed Members that the Committee had also been updated with respect to maintaining Safe to Manage Crewing Levels and Health & Safety matters.

Mrs Rice referred to the redeployment of staff and sought clarification as to the current position.

The Interim Chief Executive explained there are existing arrangements for flexibility to redeploy staff subject to a robust rationale for doing so, although he questioned to what extent this could be utilised given the level of vacancies within the Organisation.

During discussion in relation to the redeployment of staff and the conducting of a skills analysis, Members expressed concern regarding the lack of progress to address same. The Interim Chief Executive outlined work to be taken forward to map out the vacancies across the Organisation and to identify where Agency staff are employed. Members noted this would be presented to the Human Resources Committee.

Following further discussion, Members, on the motion of Mr Kerr, seconded by Mrs Tally, agreed that the matter of redeployment of staff and a skills analysis be deferred to the Human Resources Committee following initial consideration by the Corporate Management Team.

Members also requested that a detailed plan pertaining to the appointment/redeployment of staff, including timeframes, be presented to the Board.

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

Operations

The Chairman expressed his appreciation to the following –

- Assistant Chief Fire Officer Ashford for a comprehensive range of events to mark Fire Safety Week;
- Area staff for facilitating Board Members' attendances at Station Audits;
- DHSSPS/NIFRS senior staff for progress on procurement/CoPE issues;
- All operational staff involved in the recent airport and oil refinery exercises in Western Area.

The Chairman referred to an ICT issue which impacted on RCC mobilisations as winter time changed on 28 October. The Interim Chief Fire Officer gave Members an overview of the matter highlighting that, although there is no call-out arrangements in place, staff did respond and resolve the issue. He added that while there had been no adverse impact on mobilising, the issue did highlight the NIFRS vulnerability with the current system.

In response to a request for an update on the SOS project, the Interim Chief Fire Officer outlined the current position for the information of Members. He explained that subsequent to this, issues had been identified in respect of arrangements in relation to Red Cross vehicles and Action Cancer. Members noted that a report on the matter was being prepared for the Corporate Management Team and subsequently the Board.

Members noted that the Chairman and Assistant Chief Fire Officer Ashford would be attending a Prince's Trust Presentation at Cheshire Fire & Rescue Service. [Post Meeting Note: The Chairman subsequently withdrew from this event due to pressure of other NIFRS commitments.]

National Joint Council Matters

The Chairman informed Members that he had attended the National Joint Council Annual General Meeting on 4 October 2012. Members noted that the Lead Group would be meeting in late November to look at aspects of FRS Reform.

The Chairman updated Members on progress with respect to the Fire/Police Reform in Scotland.

Staffing Issues

The Chairman noted that updates with respect to the Director of HR and Director of Planning posts and also the Retained recruitment process would be provided later in the Meeting.

Strategic Direction

The Chairman and Members commented positively with regard to the Desertcreat briefing which had taken place on 23 October 2012.

The Chairman informed Members of the Desertcreat Curriculum Conference scheduled to take place on 21 and 22 November 2012. Members to advise the Board Administrative Secretary should they wish to attend all or part of the Desertcreat Curriculum Conference.

Members noted that a CIPFA Conference on Corporate Governance would be held on 22 November 2012. The Chairman suggested that, in the light of recent Reports, NIFRS should have some representation at the Conference. Members to advise the Board Administrative Secretary should they wish to attend the CIPFA Conference.

The Chairman reminded Members of the need for the Board to lead strategic direction and to balance the time devoted to routine business. He noted that weaknesses had been identified in the quality and quantity of the information received by Members. He also noted that the current Board was halfway through its tenure and that a possible way forward would be for the Board to revisit the current membership of the Board's Standing Committees or the status quo remains and the conveners of each of the Committees discuss an assessment of their information needs. He stated that it was his personal view that the latter option was the most appropriate way forward as the Board and its Committees were now embedded.

During discussion, Members noted the need for Committees to optimise their scrutiny role and outlined their views with respect to the format of the Standing Committees and in particular with respect to the quality and quantity of the information presented and the need for relevant Directors to be in attendance at Meetings to ensure accountability and to ensure actions are progressed. The Interim Chief Executive and Interim Chief Fire Officer outlined work completed/in progress with respect to ensuring accountability and identifying information needs both in respect of the Corporate Management Team and the Board.

Following further discussion, Members agreed that each of the Board's Standing Committees conduct an assessment of its information needs.

The Chairman commented that the Minister and the Permanent Secretary were looking for full and open accountability and outlined his views with respect to the Board Agenda and the need to consider key strategic issues.

Members noted that NIFRS Quarterly Accountability Meeting with DHSSPS had taken place 29 October 2012. The Chairman advised Members of the purpose of the Accountability Meeting and commented positively on the Meeting the previous day.

The Interim Chief Executive answered Members' questions regarding the Permanent Secretary and DHSSPS' expectations in relation to addressing issues emanating from the external Reports.

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

Director of Finance & Performance Management

Members noted the Report from the Director of Finance & Performance Management. The Director of Finance & Performance Management gave Members an overview of the salient points and answered Members' questions regarding aspects of the information presented.

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 the information presented.

In light of a query raised by Mrs Tally, in future information relating to incidents of fire deaths to be incorporated within the Director of Operation's Report, particularly in relation to failures to respond.

Planning & Corporate Affairs Directorate

There was no report relating to the Planning & Corporate Affairs Directorate.

The Interim Chief Executive informed Members that a detailed Report pertaining to the Planning & Corporate Affairs Directorate would be presented to the next Board Meeting.

Director of Safety Services

The Report from the Director of Safety Services was noted. Members noted the current position with respect to the Media Services Tender and expressed concern regarding the lack of progress and the potential impact on the delivery of fire safety messages.

Head of HR

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

Referring to the priority vacancies, the Interim Chief Executive advised Members that Panel Members would be contacted in order to progress these appointments. The Chairman asked Members to facilitate diary requirements as far as possible.

Chief Executive

The Chairman referred to the publication of the audit/investigation Reports and acknowledged the huge challenge ahead for the Organisation. He read a statement to the Meeting outlining his views/comments with respect to the publication of the Reports.

The Chairman expressed his appreciation to the Interim Chief Executive in respect of his media interviews which were professional and honest; to the Interim Chief Executive and Interim Chief Fire Officer on their responses to the Health Committee; to Mrs McNally, Corporate Communications Manager, and her colleagues in the Corporate Communications Department; Mrs Poots, Mrs Gelston and Mrs Hill for the huge amounts of additional work and time contributed to this matter.

Referring to NIFRS responses to the Reports, the Chairman explained that the Interim Chief Executive had prepared a Report for consideration/discussion. He explained that the Corporate Management Team would be tasked with developing an Action Plan which is to be presented to DHSSPS by 30 November 2012. He stated that the Corporate Management Team will need to look at the Reports in detail; outstanding Grievances will need to be progressed as a priority; and the Board may need to consider other actions including the possibility of disciplinary action.

A Report from the Interim Chief Executive was circulated for the consideration of Members. The Interim Chief Executive explained that his Report was an initial response to the conclusions and recommendations of the Reports, and outlined his views with respect to the reports and also his early thoughts on how the actions arising from the Reports should be taken forward. He acknowledged that, whilst the Reports highlight significant failings in NIFRS, now that the Reports were published it represented a real opportunity for the Organisation to move forward.

He stated that the issue of governance and accountability is key across many of the recommendations and the Corporate Management Team will work closely with the Board to ensure that we build a better governance and accountability framework that will provide the openness, transparency and scrutiny that is expected and demanded of us which can only be in all our interests.

He noted that the Minister presented the reports to the Assembly on Tuesday, 16 October 2012 and understandably made some strong comments about the Organisation's performance. He drew Members' attention to the Minister's comments that a number of crucial issues need to be actioned and reminded Members that work has already started some time ago in relation to the recommendations and actions, and what NIFRS must do is to build on this foundation and take the improvement plan forward.

The Interim Chief Executive informed Members that NIFRS have held lengthy discussions with the Department on how we move the process forward and more detailed dialogue will inevitably take place between the Corporate Management Team and NIFRS Board.

The Interim Chief Executive explained the process for moving forward is set out in a letter from the Permanent Secretary, and in line with the expectations referred to in the letter, the Corporate Management Team have started working on draft proposals for 9 November 2012, together with an expectation that final proposals will be endorsed by NIFRS Board not later than 30 November 2012. He noted the challenging timeframes for the proposals which will have an impact on the Organisation's capacity and explained that there may be issues to consider in terms of capability to deliver a number of specific recommendations. He stated that for now, the Corporate Management Team will undertake an early assessment of the full impact of the reports and develop a high level action plan which we will also bring to the Board for consideration.

Referring to the way forward, the Interim Chief Executive outlined his proposal for an independent overview to be conducted by external Reviewers of the recommendations contained in all 4 Reports. Members noted the Terms of Reference for the proposed review.

During discussion, the Interim Chief Executive answered Members' questions in relation to timescales for the preparing of draft proposals and also in relation to the proposed independent review of the recommendations contained in all of the Reports.

In response to a question from Mrs Tally, the Interim Chief Executive explained that the proposed independent overview had been discussed with DHSSPS who were supportive. He stated that the overview would provide clarity, would address capacity issues and would be a focused piece of work providing a clear way forward.

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At this point,
Mrs Rice left the Meeting

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Members sought clarification about the cost of the proposed external review. The Interim Chief Executive assured Members that there would be no issues around procurement and that the normal procurement rules would apply.

Following further detailed discussion, the Board, on the motion of Mr J Barbour, seconded by Mr Kerr, unanimously –

Resolved: “to approve the recommendation for an independent overview to be conducted by external Reviewers subject to procurement processes and Departmental approval”.

In response to clarification sought from the Chairman, the Members indicated their support for the Chairman's statement with respect to the publication of the external Reports.

Item 7: Standing Items

Publication of External Reports

Item previously discussed during the Meeting.

Desertcreat Project

Members noted the Briefing Note providing an update with respect to the Desertcreat Project.

WPF 2013

Members noted a Briefing Note providing an update with respect to WPF 2013.

Item 8: Standalone Strategic Items

Economic Appraisal for the Provision of Uniform (Non-Firefighting)

Members noted the Economic Appraisal for the provision of Uniform (non-firefighting) for NIFRS Staff.

The Interim Chief Fire Officer gave an overview of the Economic Appraisal, the purpose of which is to put in place a 3-year arrangement to acquire uniform for Operational and Support staff within NIFRS.

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

Resolved: “to approve the Economic Appraisal for the provision of Uniform (Non-Firefighting)”.

Economic Appraisal for Retained Availability Software

Members noted the Economic Appraisal for Retained Availability Software.

The Interim Chief Fire Officer outlined the purpose of the Appraisal explaining that the procurement of an electronic recording system will allow NIFRS to manage and monitor in real-time the availability of Retained personnel.

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

Resolved: “to approve the Economic Appraisal for Retained Availability Software.”

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:

Volkswagon Group UK Limited – Cars;

Fiat Professional UK Limited – Small Vans;

Donnelly Bros Citroen – Medium Vans; and

The Secretary of State of Communities & Local Government – Provision of Accommodation at Bangor District Headquarters for use by Maritime & Coastguard Agency.

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 5.50 PM
