

NORTHERN IRELAND FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE BOARD

MINUTES OF A MEETING (VIA TELECONFERENCE)

31 MARCH 2020

11.00 AM

PRESENT: Ms C McKinney, Chairperson presiding
Mr M Graham, Chief Fire & Rescue Officer (Interim)
Mr C Enright
Mr K Henning
Mr P Martin
Mr R Irvine
Mr G Smyth

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr M Deeney, Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer
(Transformation, Performance & Governance)
Mr A Jennings, Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer (Service Support)
Mr A Walmsley, Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer (Service Delivery)
Mrs P White, Director of Finance
Mrs E Magee, Acting Director of Human Resources
Mr C Williams, Associate Consultant, LGA (Closed Session only)
Ms I Hill, Board Administrative Secretary
Ms R Morgan, DoH Observer

Prior to the commencement of Business, the Chairperson paid tribute to NHS and NIFRS personnel who are all going that extra mile in these challenging and unprecedented times dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. She added that we are all in this together and expressed her thanks to all.

Item 1: Apologies:

There were no apologies from Members.

Item 2: Declaration of Interests

The Chairperson enquired as to whether any Members of the Board wished to declare any potential conflicts of interest with any of the business items on the Agenda. Members confirmed there were no apparent conflicts of interest.

Mr Martin noted a potential conflict with respect to his position as Special Adviser to the Minister of Education. This was noted by the Chairperson who indicated that the appropriate procedures would be applied if necessary.

Item 3: Minutes of Board Meeting – 25 February 2020

The Minutes of the Board Meeting held on 25 February 2020, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read and signed as a true record, on the motion of Mr Henning, seconded by Mr Irvine.

Arising from the Minutes:

Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed the Meeting that 6 new Members had been appointed to the Board effective from 1 April 2020. She thanked current Members for the considerable additional work that they and indeed she had carried from February 2019 until now as NIFRS awaited the results of the 2019 PAU recruitment campaign to appoint new colleagues.

The Chairperson stated that she and the Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer would officially welcome the new Members on behalf of the Board. She also advised that a detailed induction programme, along with meet and greet engagements, visits and other events and new Member mentoring had been drawn up but given the current circumstances with the Coronavirus, and having due regard for guidance and advice issued to all public bodies, the face-to-face programme had to be suspended. She stated that she would return to same when it was safe to do so

DoH Communication - Accounting Officer in Departments, Agencies and NDPBs

The Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer informed Members of correspondence received pertaining to the role of Accounting Officer and the need for contingency arrangements given the potential impact of absence due to COVID-19.

He explained that he would discuss the issue with the Corporate Management Team and refer back to the Board.

NIFRS Strategic Plan 2020-25

The Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer updated Members' on the current position explaining that, following the Board's input, the Plan had been revised and shared with DoH. Referring to the consultation exercise, the Interim Chief Fire & Officer explained that, given that current situation with COVID-19, it had been agreed that the time was not appropriate to proceed with the consultation exercise.

The DoH Observer advised the Meeting that the NIFRS Strategic Plan had been taken forward within DoH for further comment. The Chairperson advised that she and colleagues would welcome DoH views and, if so, incorporate same going forward. She noted that given new colleagues were coming on to the Board this will also provide opportunities to give them the overview of the work which had been ongoing since Spring 2019.

Item 4: Items for Adoption/Approval

Reports from Board Committees, including noting of Committee Minutes and adoption of Recommendations

Service Delivery Committee - Meeting – 19 March 2020

A Meeting of the Service Delivery Committee was held on 19 March 2020. The Minutes of this Meeting will be presented to the next Meeting of the Board.

Mr Irvine, Chairperson of the Service Delivery Committee, proposed that the Committee's recommendations, as detailed below, be adopted by the Board. This was seconded by Mr Enright.

Service Delivery Committee - Recommendations

- **Approval of the draft Competency Framework for NIFRS Fire Safety Inspectors and Managers;**
- **Approval of revised NIFRS Accident Investigation Policy;**
- **Approval to withdraw NIFRS draft Emergency Response Standards 2015/16;**
- **Approval of draft Initial Response Time Measurement and Reporting in NIFRS.**

Resources Committee - Meeting – 19 March 2020

A Meeting of the Resources Committee was held on 19 March 2020. The Minutes of this Meeting will be presented to the next Meeting of the Board.

Mr Henning, Chairperson of the Resources Committee, proposed that the Committee's recommendations, as detailed below, be adopted by the Board. This was seconded by Mr Enright.

Resources Committee - Recommendations

- **Approval of the Project Plan for a Wholetime Firefighter recruitment exercise;**
- **Approval of revised NIFRS Flexible Working Hours Policy;**
- **Approval of NIFRS draft Operational Competency Framework;**
- **Approval to progress the appointment of RCC recruits;**
- **Approval of NIFRS draft Learning & Development Attendance Policy (Training for Competence);**
- **Approval of revised NIFRS Driver Training Policy.**

Standing Order 2.6 - Business Case – Renewal of Sophtlogic Support & Maintenance

Under Standing Order 2.6, Members unanimously agreed to approve the Business Case for the Renewal of Sophtlogic Support & Maintenance.

The Board, on the motion of Mr Irvine, seconded by Mr Henning, unanimously agreed to adopt the recommendation to approve the Business Case for the Renewal of Sophtlogic Support & Maintenance.

Business Cases

Stock and Asset Management

Members noted the Executive Summary pertaining to the Business Case for Stock and Asset Management.

Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Jennings gave a brief overview of the project for the investment in a new Stock and Asset Management platform for NIFRS in support of transformation of NIFRS Service Support Centre.

Breathing Apparatus Charging Pods

The Executive Summary relating to the Business Case for Breathing Apparatus (BA) Charging Pods was noted.

Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Jennings outlined the purpose of the project.

The Officers answered Members' questions relating to the information presented.

The Board, on the motion of Mr Henning, seconded by Mr Irvine, unanimously agreed to approve the Business Cases for Stock and Asset Management and Breathing Apparatus Charging Pods.

Item 5: Items for Information/Noting Standalone Strategic Items

Update from Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer

The Chairperson noted that the Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Office would be briefing Members on business activities across the Organisation in light of the very challenging COVID-19 situation currently.

The Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer provided a high level overview of NIFRS COVID-19 Response Plan including an outline of the Gold Command Group which had been established and its purpose. He noted that a Silver Cell had been introduced within Service Delivery and this was supported by each Directorate.

The Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer explained to Members that strategic objectives had been developed and agreed and also an Emergency Response Plan developed.

Referring to external structures, the Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer summarised the strategic reporting structures highlighting NIFRS participation in DoH Gold and the Civil Contingencies Group NI (CCGNI) and noting the key NI issues. He added that NIFRS had commenced early engagement with other partners – NIAS and PSNI and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC).

The Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer provided a synopsis of key decisions and measures put in place to protect the core functionality of our “999” response model. He explained that the current Interim Delivery Model and associated Pilots had been reviewed to ensure frontline personnel are deployed as effectively as possible. He further explained that a number of primary functions such as Training, Prevention and Protection initiatives, etc, have been scaled down due to the current situation, we have reviewed how those personnel can be most effectively used to support our Service Delivery response function.

With respect to front-facing Prevention and Protection, the Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer noted the approach currently being taken. He noted that a press release had been prepared to advise the public of the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery, fire safety, etc, and added that the press release would be shared in advance with Members.

The Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer updated Members on actions to ensure that RCC personnel are isolated as best possible and outlined contingency plans which had been put in place to support RCC personnel.

The Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer emphasised that key considerations during the pandemic were people and finance. He informed Members that a degradation plan had been put in place within the Finance Directorate to ensure staff received pay and suppliers received payment. He also noted work being undertaken and progressed by the HR Directorate with respect to employees’ working practices, etc.

The Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer updated Members on business which was ongoing such as NIFRS Business Plan; preparation of the year-end accounts; service delivery remodelling; and work within Estates.

The Chairperson advised Members that she asked the Head of Organisational Development to prepare a weekly newsletter updating Members on NIFRS COVID-19 response/activities, etc. She stated that given the Board must be fully apprised this medium would ensure Members receive up-to-date information on strategic matters going forward.

During a full discussion, the Officers answered Members’ questions and provided clarification with respect aspects relating to the information presented, including the current position with respect to staff working from home; security and governance of information management for remote working; reporting of COVID related illness/self isolation; potential to provide assistance to the Health Service.

The Chairperson and Members thanked the Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer for his briefing and commended NIFRS on its response to date. The Chairperson reiterated that the issue of a weekly newsletter to Members will assist to keep all Members, particularly new colleagues joining the Board at this critical time with COVID, are fully informed during these difficult and challenging times.

The Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer thanked his Team and everyone for all their work, acknowledging that many were going above and beyond, to deal with the challenges and impact of COVID-19.

Finance Report

The Briefing Paper updating Members on the financial position was noted.

The Director of Finance provided an overview of the information noting the Revenue budget position as at 29 February 2020 which was showing an underspend of £1.2m. She explained that a review of the current position is under way as part of the year end accounts preparation and stated that she was confident that a break even position at year-end would be achieved.

The Director of Finance noted that recent developments relating to COVID-19 are anticipated to have an impact on spend for the 2019/20 year. She explained that some of the tangible measures being taken by NIFRS, eg, the provision of face masks, will come with a cost, as will the provision of overtime to cover staff absence. However, these additional costs will be offset by a reduction in costs associated with cancellation of training, conferences and travel. She stated that this is a very fluid and evolving situation in which health and wellbeing is of primary importance; however the Corporate Management Team remains committed to managing the budget impacts.

The Director of Finance drew Members' attention to a pressure on income generation due to the timing of the receipt of income from Mid Ulster Council in relation to a right of way at LDC Cookstown. She advised that Legal teams are currently working through terms of agreement, however, it is unlikely that this process will complete by year end. She stated that the pressure can be managed through flexibility elsewhere in the budget.

Referring to the Capital budget, the Director of Finance gave an overview of the position as at 29 February 2020 noting that a break even position at year-end is anticipated.

The Director of Finance updated Members on the current position with respect to the Pension Administration project and Business Case approvals. She reported positively on NIFRS Prompt Payment performance noting that the target had been achieved 3 months in a row. She explained that NIFRS is now working with Internal Audit to action the closure of this historical recommendation.

The Director of Finance informed Members that NIFRS had been advised that the budget allocation for 2020/21 is £79.4m. She noted that work will be progressed in the coming weeks to develop a balanced budget. She further noted that a budget for managing the impact of COVID would be issued separately.

The Director of Finance answered Members' questions relating to the information provided.

Reports from Board Committees, including noting of Committee Minutes and adoption of Recommendations

Audit, Risk & Governance Committee - Minutes – 12 February 2020

It was noted that the Minutes of the Meeting of the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee held on 12 February 2020 will be presented for noting at the next Meeting of the Board.

Remuneration Committee - Minutes – 25 February 2020

It was noted that the Minutes of the Remuneration Committee held on 25 February 2020 will be presented to the next Board Meeting.

Item 6: Chairperson's Business

DoH Communication to Chairperson and ICFRO

The Chairperson noted that this had been discussed previously.

Retirement - ACFRO Walmsley

The Chairperson stated that Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Walmsley would be retiring in the next few weeks. She noted that given the current situation she was unable, on behalf of the Board, to make a formal presentation but had left a gift to mark his retirement.

The Chairperson paid tribute to Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Walmsley for his commitment and enormous contribution to NIFRS, particularly during his time as Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer. She extended best wishes for his retirement.

Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Walmsley thanked the Chairperson and the Members for their support and guidance.

The Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer also paid tribute to Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Walmsley for his work and support to NIFRS. He also extended his personal thanks.

Item 7: Relevant Correspondence

There was no relevant correspondence.

Item 8: Documents for Sealing

There were no documents for sealing.

Item 9: Schedule of Future Meetings

The schedule of future Meetings, etc, was noted.

The Chairperson noted that a key Meeting of the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee was scheduled for 21 May 2020 and that for year-end continuity the current membership would remain as is.

The Chairperson noted previous discussions relating to video conferencing and sought an update on progress. She stressed the absolute necessity for this to be completely functioning to the satisfaction of members over the next period.

The Director of Finance updated the Meeting on the current position explaining that it was hoped to have a solution implemented in the next few weeks.

The Chairperson explained that given the circumstances we all find ourselves in at the present time with Coronavirus there were no face-to-face Board Meetings scheduled for April and May. She would of course review this should the need arise. She stressed how critical the IT element was over the next period and its functionality needed to be a priority.

She further noted that, having discussed with the Committee Chairpersons, Committee Meetings were not scheduled. It has been agreed with the Chairpersons of these Committees that if matters needed to be addressed these could be escalated to the Board and a Meeting convened. They would also defer to the Officers who service those Committees for guidance in the event of a Meeting being required.

She reiterated that the newsletter and strong communication channels from NIFRS to Members would keep Members apprised at a high level with respect to NIFRS' COVID-19 response. She advised that a letter would be issued to the new Members welcoming them to the Board and advising of the current position with respect to their induction, meetings, etc. She noted that she had also written to each Member and she looked forward enormously to having a full complement of colleagues on the Board going forward.

In response to the matter raised by Mr Enright regarding the progress of the Transformation Programme currently and when the organisation gets through the current emergency, the Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer updated Members on progress. He assured Members that, where capacity exists, Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Deeney continues to progress same.

Members agreed that there was an urgent need for DoH approval for the Business Case relating to Transformation as soon as possible.

Following a request from the Chairperson, the DoH Observer advised on the current position on the business case noting that a response to DoH queries was awaited from NIFRS.

In response to a question from the Chairperson, Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Deeney noted the current position and assured Members that NIFRS' response to DoH was imminent. The Chairperson stressed that this was an urgent priority and sought a timeline for when this would be done. The Interim Chief Fire & Rescue Officer assured Members that this would be taken forward without delay.

Mr Martin referred to his appointment as SPAD to the Minister for Education and noted the conclusion of his current position of his tenure on the Board. This was noted.

THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS
AND THE MEETING ENDED
AT 12.10 PM
