

# NORTHERN IRELAND FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE BOARD

## MINUTES OF A MEETING WELLINGTON PARK HOTEL (VIA VIDEO CONFERENCE)

**Social Distancing and all PHA guidance adhered to for members and officers  
in the room**

**24 JULY 2020**

**1.30 PM**

PRESENT: Ms C McKinney, Chairperson presiding  
Mr M Graham, Chief Fire & Rescue Officer  
Mrs B Anley (*via video link*)  
Mr J Craig  
Mr C Enright  
Mr K Henning (*via video link*)  
Mr R Irvine  
Mrs H Singleton (*via video link*)  
Mrs L Smith (*via video link*)  
Mr T O'Hanlon (*via video link*)  
Mr J Quinn

APOLOGIES: Mr G Smyth

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr A Jennings, Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer (Service Support)  
Mr P Gallagher, Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer (Service Delivery)  
Mrs P White, Interim Director of Finance  
Mrs E Magee, Interim Director of Human Resources  
Miss D Reynolds, Head of Planning, Performance & Governance  
Ms I Hill, Governance & Business Support Services Adviser

The Chairperson noted her continuing frustration with the ongoing difficulties/failures with NIFRS video conferencing system which had culminated into the Board Meeting having to be facilitated externally. She considered that the Board had been patient and understanding in terms of initial difficulties but she confirmed that from her perspective the situation could not go on as it was given that the difficulties had resulted in the meeting being in an outside venue today.

The Chairperson invited the Interim Director of Finance to update Members on the current position/progress with respect to the system given that assurances had been given to the Board a number of months ago and as yet the matter had not been successfully expedited.

The Interim Director of Finance gave a brief overview of work which had been undertaken to the IT infrastructure which has resulted in significant improvements in the functionality of PEXIP. She outlined the next steps informing Members that it is hoped to do a PEXIP test with them all soon and that this will also include an IT health-check. The Chairperson responded by advising that Members had been given assurances over the past months and as yet PEXIP was not fully functional so her expectation would be this matter could now be finally expedited without further disruption to Members.

The Interim Director of Finance extended her apologies to Members acknowledging it is a difficult time. The Chairperson concurred that it had indeed been a frustrating time for Members and indeed herself as Chairperson and this matter needed to be worked through by the appropriate senior personnel in NIFRS so as efficiency was now assured.

The Chairperson informed Members that the Department of Health and the Deputy Secretary had been notified of the difficulties by the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer, Interim Director of Finance and herself.

The Interim Director of Finance referred to the Agenda Item relating to the draft Annual Report & Statement of Accounts 2019/20 noting that it had been hoped to present the draft document for approval and sign off.

She advised Members that NIAO normally receive annual assurance on the reliability of GAD's work as an expert through work commissioned by NAO. She explained that NIAO is unable to certify the Accounts as this assurance has not been received yet. She noted that the NIAO Technical team is liaising with NAO regarding the GAD assurance. The Interim Director of Finance further explained that we are also awaiting confirmation of the McCloud/Sargeant inclusion as part of the NIAO certification process. She highlighted that this was an issue being dealt with across Health and other public bodies. She stated that she was hopeful the Accounts would be presented for approval in August.

The Chairperson moved the Meeting into a Closed Session to consider the next Item of Business.

### **Item 3: Chairperson's Business (Closed Session)**

The Chairperson stressed the importance of maintaining confidentiality in this matter and stated that the Board would take the time as necessary to consider the report on the Independent Review into Issues around the Investigation Processes and Timescales 2019/20. The Chairperson explained that the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer would present the report and the associated actions following which she would invite questions from Members.

The Chairperson advised that Mr Smyth, Chairperson of the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee, was not in attendance and stated that Mr Irvine was present and would represent the Committee if comments from the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee were required.

The Chairperson noted the Report raised significant concerns and given the real progress that had been made over the past years in particular under the leadership of Gordon Smyth as Audit Chair, working with and through the Head of PPG and the work of the Business Improvement Days, the Report showed a number of significant failings across a number of areas.

She further emphasised that the Board, in its role, will take the necessary time to ensure that it is assured that the appropriate action is being taken by the Executive Team to address the issues emanating from the report.

The Chairperson invited the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer to present the Report.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer set the context for the review outlining in detail work/processes which had been conducted or was ongoing at the time of receipt of the MLA's letter in June 2019.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer explained that given the concerns raised within the MLA's letter, he commissioned Internal Audit to undertake an independent review into issues around the investigation processes and timescales, relating to matters raised in the letter. He outlined how the review was taken forward and the challenges faced by Internal Audit in conducting the review.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer provided a synopsis of actions taken to date by the Organisation which included the establishment of an Independent Review Working Group. He provided an overview of the make-up of the Group and also its purpose. He further advised Members of the establishment of a Case Conferencing Group with agreed Terms of Reference. The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer added that NIFRS had also engaged external support to work closely with the Director of HR with regard to the reviewing of HR policies. He noted that investigation training had been purchased and will be rolled out next month.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer gave a brief overview of the next steps particularly with regard to the work of the Independent Review Working Group. He stated that he hoped significant progress would be reported at the next Business Improvement Day scheduled for September. The Chairperson accepted that the Business Improvement Day would indeed add an additional scrutiny mechanism it was not, in her view, sufficient given the significance of the Report.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer highlighted that Internal Audit will be reviewing completion/implementation of the recommendations emanating from the review. He added that the Chairperson of the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee would be kept up-to-date on progress, along with DoH and NIAO. The Chairperson advised that the Board needs to be kept apprised and a mechanism to do that needed to be agreed.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer stated that he was happy to share the Terms of Reference for the Independent Review Working Group and the Case Conferencing Group with Members. This was welcomed.

The Chairperson referred to the outcome of a recent Industrial Tribunal and informed Members that, on behalf of the Board, having discussed same with the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer and informed DoH, she had commissioned a piece of work to be conducted by an external reviewer across a number of areas of concern flowing from that ruling. She explained that she could not give details but assured Members that she would keep them fully apprised at the appropriate time. She advised that Mr Henning was the lead Member on behalf of the Board for the piece of work.

The Chairperson acknowledged the work progressed by the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer in showing leadership to take this matter through the very necessary checks and balances to ensure a thorough investigation. She noted that whilst this was the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer and Executive led piece of work, Members may also have a view on the appropriate actions to address the Review's recommendations should they not be assured in their role as the Board. She was confident that progress, under the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer's leadership, to address the recommendations would be swift and detailed and it would very important that the Board was part of that working with and through him and his work stream leads.

Mr Irvine, Member of the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee, acknowledged the positive work and improvements made in NIFRS governance over recent years but expressed the Committee's concerns that this review has identified specific issues around management effectiveness, governance, culture and probity. This therefore further emphasised the need for the Board to be assured and this could be assisted by representation of one or 2 members to have high level oversight on the Independent Review Working Group.

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At this point,  
Mr Enright joined the Meeting (2.10 pm)

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A Member enquired would it not have been more appropriate for the senior managers to not be in attendance at such a sensitive meeting as today which was dealing with significant executive issues.

The Chairperson advised that in her view it was appropriate for them to be there alongside the Chief for this meeting, however, she accepted the point made by the Member and would, if necessary, discuss further with the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer.

The Officers answered Members' questions to provide clarity on a number of points.

The Head of PPG confirmed to Members that both she and the Chairperson had availed of the NIAO webinar on Raising Concerns and the briefing on that would go through the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee in due course for discussion.

In response to Members' questions relating to training, the Interim Director of HR provided an overview of work ongoing within Organisational Development and training planned for the year ahead particularly with regard to the theme of 'personal responsibility'. She also gave an overview of the investigative training which was being rolled out next month.

The Chairperson felt it would have been useful to have had further discussion on those points at the Meeting as she would welcome more detail on a number of areas. She recognised however that, as time did not permit today, this detail could be taken through the appropriate Committee membership going forward.

Members stressed the need for Board high level oversight on this matter with a suggestion that consideration be given to the establishment of a Task and Finish Working Group with Board Member input and also Board representation on the Independent Review Working Group. The Chairperson stressed the need for the Board to be assured that the failings raised within the Review Report would not be repeated.

She proposed, and Members concurred, that there should be a Member on the Working Group and she would therefore consider who best to do this whilst at the same time ensuring that the Executives led by the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer continued to own the action plan within their roles and as such are held to account for its implementation by the Board in its role.

The Chairperson did not feel that a Task and Finish Member Group was required given that this Report was very much an Executive commissioned and led piece of work and as such the recommendations and their implementation belonged to the Executives and the Board should therefore in its role scrutinise and fulfil its obligations to hold them to account within the Committee and Board forums.

At this point, the Chairperson proposed a short comfort break after which the Board would consider the way forward.

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THE MEETING ADJOURNED AT 3.00 PM  
AND RECONVENED AT 3.15 PM

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The Chairperson noted that Members had had the opportunity to express their views with regard to the Report and stated that she was now keen to agree a way forward.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer summarised the key points within the Report.

The Chairperson noted that she felt there was a need for a 3-5 year programme to address the cultural and behavioural aspects.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer noted again that he had commissioned Internal Audit to conduct the review and summarised the key areas of concern.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer referred to Members' comments regarding the matter of a Task and Finish Working Group with Board Member representation and stated that he was content to explore this further with the Chairperson .

The Chairperson noted same however as this was a Chief Fire & Rescue Officer led commissioned piece of work, she considered that the Board's role would be to monitor and scrutinise progress. She reiterated to Members that she guaranteed to return to this suggestion should that be required but it would be important to facilitate the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer to lead on the action plan and keep the Board fully informed.

The Chairperson confirmed that she would liaise with the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer with regard to the Investigative Panel and she confirmed with Members that they were content for her to proceed to approach a Member on their behalf. Members agreed.

With regard to the full Board being kept apprised, the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer suggested that it would be included as a Standing Agenda Item on the Board Agenda with the Working Group lead or Board lead reporting through on progress. He noted that he still proposed to bring same through for update at the Board Business Improvement Day. This was welcomed by Members as an additional avenue for scrutiny.

The Chairperson concurred with the Members' suggestion that the matter be a Standing Item for the Board Agenda.

Following discussion, Members unanimously agreed that Progress Updates on the Independent Review into Issues around the Investigation Processes and Timescales 2019/20 be a Standing Item on the Board's Agenda and also the secondment of a Member onto the Investigative Panel which the Chairperson would take forward without delay.

The Chairperson stated that she was deeply proud of NIFRS and noted that the new Board colleagues will get an opportunity in due course to visit Stations and to meet personnel on the ground and see first-hand the service which NIFRS provides every day.

She referred to the Report and how alarming it was for Members given the enormous work done by them over the past 4 years in very challenging circumstances which demanded their steadfastness, commitment and resilience in very difficult times. She highlighted the work of the Audit, Risk & Governance Chair and Committee as well as the Head of PPG for their work across a range of areas which had shown significant improvement across the Business Improvement areas and it was important for her to fully acknowledge those yet critically important for everyone to fully accept there was still a journey of improvement to travel. She advised that a Business Improvement Day would be scheduled very shortly and this would hopefully assist new Members to gain a full context on the work which was led by the Head of PPG.

The Chairperson commended the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer for his leadership in taking this difficult Report forward and being open, professional and willing to work with and through Members to address the improvements necessary.

The Chairperson referred to the Committee structure which was currently under review and stated that she would revisit same to ensure that all strands of work emanating from the Review are captured within the TORS. She would soon be ready to advise on the Committee Membership with the intention of those starting up in October.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer stated that he welcomed today's session and that he appreciated the Board's views and insights to assist him and the CMT to address the areas for improvement going forward.

Referring to the review of Committee structures, he felt it was appropriate to have a Committee with a focus on the NIFRS People Strategy suggesting the need to invest Board oversight over the longer-term. This point would be captured in the TORS for the new Committees.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer stated that he would circulate the Terms of Reference of the new Executive Working Groups to Members for information. The Chairperson welcomed this and requested this to be done as soon as practicable.

The Chairperson closed this Item. She enquired if Members wished to continue to progress through Business on the Agenda.

Mrs Anley enquired if there were any items on the Agenda which could be approved by the Board via email.

Following advice from the Officers, Members subsequently agreed that approval for the following items would be sought under Standing Order 2.6 –

- Regional Control Centre (RCC) and Operational Communications Recruitment;
- Business Case for the Delivery of Estates Maintenance Service through an Estates Term Service Short Contract (TSSC); and
- Business Case - Dunmurry Lease Extension.

The Governance & Business Support Services Adviser explained the need to ratify the Minutes of the Board Meeting held in March. The Chairperson agreed.

It was also agreed to defer the remainder of the Business to the next Meeting of the Board.

The Board then reconvened in open session.

**Item 4: Minutes of Board Meeting – 31 March 2020**

The Minutes of the Board Meeting held on 31 March 2020, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read and signed as a true record, on the motion of Mr Irvine, seconded by Mr Craig.

The Chairperson thanked everyone for their participation. She also expressed her appreciation to Ms Hill (Governance & Business Support Services Adviser) and Mrs O'Connor (Head of Organisational Development) for their assistance in setting up the Board Meeting and in particular the video conferencing.

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THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS  
AND THE MEETING ENDED  
AT 3.55 PM

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