

# NORTHERN IRELAND FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE BOARD

## MINUTES OF A MEETING (VIRTUAL MEETING)

29 SEPTEMBER 2021

2.45 PM

**PRESENT:** Ms C McKinney, Chairperson presiding (*in the room*)  
Mr P O'Reilly, Chief Fire & Rescue Officer (*in the room*)  
Ms B Anley  
Mr J Craig  
Mr C Enright  
Mr K Henning  
Mr R Irvine  
Mr T O'Hanlon  
Mr J Quinn  
Mrs H Singleton  
Ms L Smith

**IN ATTENDANCE:** Mr M Deeney, Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer  
(*in the room*) (Transformation, Performance & Governance)  
Mr P Gallagher, Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer (Service  
Delivery)  
Mr A Jennings, Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer (Service  
Support)  
Mrs P White, Interim Director of Finance  
Mrs D O'Connor, Interim Director of Human Resources  
Miss D Reynolds, Head of Planning, Performance &  
Governance  
Miss A Maguire, Personal Assistant  
Mrs R Morgan, DoH Observer (*via video link*)

The Chairperson welcomed everyone to the Open Meeting. She referred to the earlier Board session with Minister Swann and acknowledged that she would write to the Minister to thank him for his attendance at today's Board session. Members also agreed that the session had been very useful.

### **Item 1: Apologies**

There were no apologies.

### **Item 2: Conflicts of Interest**

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.

At this point, the Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, wished Ms Irene Hill, Governance & Business Support Services Advisor, a speedy recovery from her illness. She thanked Annemarie Maguire for her assistance in the absence of the Board Secretariat.

### **Item 3: Minutes of Board Meeting – 9 July 2021**

The Minutes of the Board Meeting held on 9 July 2021, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read and signed as a true record, on the motion of Ms Anley, seconded by Ms Smith.

Arising out of the Minutes:

#### **Public Sector Pensions Update**

The Interim Director of Finance provided an update with respect to the national position and noted that the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer is being kept apprised. The Interim Director of Finance reported that a position paper would be provided to the Board in due course. The Chairperson requested that this matter was promptly returned in to the Board as soon as further information was available in order that Members were apprised when deemed appropriate.

#### **Motor Insurance Business Case Update**

Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Deeney provided an update to the Board and noted that the former Chief Fire & Rescue Officer had issued correspondence to DoH on 3 August outlining the Board's concerns, and a response had been received on 18 August reinforcing DoH's position. It was noted that DoH has re-affirmed its position regarding an "excessive" claim.

Mrs Singleton sought clarification with respect to legal authority and whether a statutory exemption exists as the legal advice received is contradictory. The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer asked Mrs Singleton if she would be willing to provide the wording now required to facilitate him to take the query forward with DoH. **Action – CFRO to liaise with Mrs Singleton to take forward.** Members agreed.

### **Item 4: Items for Adoption/Approval Reports from Board Committees, including noting of Committee Minutes and Adoption of Recommendations**

#### **Audit, Risk & Governance Committee – Meeting – 9 September 2021**

It was noted that a Meeting of the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee had been held on 9 September 2021. The Minutes of the Meeting will be presented at the next Meeting of the Board.

Mr Irvine, Audit, Risk & Governance Committee Member, noted the recommendation emanating from the Meeting.

**Mr Irvine, proposed that the Committee's recommendation, as detailed below, be adopted by the Board.**

*Audit, Risk & Governance Committee – Recommendation*

- **Approval of the 2021/22 Audit Plan Progress Report incorporating Insurance & Claims Management and BSO ITS SLA.**

**Service Delivery Committee - Meeting – 16 September 2021**

It was noted that a Meeting of the Service Delivery Committee had been held on 16 September 2021 and the Minutes of the Meeting will be presented at the next Meeting of the Board.

Mr Irvine, Chairperson of the Service Delivery Committee, presented the recommendation emanating from the Meeting.

**Mr Irvine proposed that the Committee’s recommendation, as detailed below, be adopted by the Board.**

***Service Delivery Committee – Recommendation***

- **Approval of the Capabilities Review – Phase 3 Proposals.**

**Standalone Strategic Items**

**NIFRS Financial Plan 2021/22 and Wholetime Crewing Management**

At the Board Meeting on 9 July 2021, the NIFRS Financial Plan 2021/22 had been presented. The Board accepted the Financial Plan at that time (but did not give final approval), subject to the Board revisiting the Plan in September when the new Chief Fire & Rescue Officer takes up post. The Board had also directed the former Chief Fire & Rescue Officer to raise with DoH their grave concerns around the urgent need for all relevant consultations being conducted and the need for additional funding.

The Board had also authorised the former Chief Fire & Rescue Officer to commence the interim operationalisation of the draft Plan. This was strongly caveated that the Plan would be reviewed at the end of September when the new CFRO came in to post.

The Interim Director of Finance gave a presentation by way of an update and provided an overview of the current position including pressures and easements, and proposed remedial action.

The Interim Director of Finance highlighted that a bid for additional funding had been made in the October Monitoring Round to help with the pressures.

Following a query from the Chairperson, the Interim Director of Finance confirmed that the former Chief Fire & Rescue Officer had corresponded with DoH with respect to the Board’s concerns and a request for additional funding. Mrs Morgan reaffirmed the position and noted that DoH had advised the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer that the pressures should be captured as part of the October Monitoring Round.

The Interim Director of Finance highlighted that Members are asked to:

- > Approve a further reduction of £300k to the maintenance budget.
- > Note the slippage in the Wholetime recruitment programme leading to a saving of £300k.
- > Approve the implementation of the degradation plan.

Members raised concerns with respect to being asked to make a decision on the afore-mentioned recommendations based on the scant information provided to them at today's Meeting. The Chairperson raised her concerns on tabled papers and why the relevant information had not been made available in advance to give Members time to consider in full.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer apologised that Members did not receive the full information in advance of the Meeting and undertook to review the protocols in place to ensure that Members would receive full information required to take informed decisions in advance of Board Meetings.

The Chairperson advised that the protocols were very clear and that the situation that Members found themselves in today was unacceptable to her and she was minded to suspend the meeting. The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer gave Members assurance that this would not occur again and expressed his personal disappointment this had happened. He undertook to liaise with the Chairperson to fully address the points made by Members.

The Chairperson highlighted that the Financial Plan merits longer and in-depth discussion. She proposed reconvening the Board Meeting at the end of October to discuss the Plan and its recommendations in full.

**Members unanimously agreed to defer a decision on the Financial Plan and the recommendations within until it is considered in full at a reconvened Board Meeting to be scheduled at the end of October 2021.**

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer undertook to forward Members the Breakeven Plan and Management of Overtime presentations in advance of the reconvened Board Meeting.

The Chairperson also considered that the unstable Zoom connections added further frustration for Members at today's meeting.

Mr Craig raised that this was an ongoing issue for a considerable number of months. He suggested the use of Council premises and their conferencing facilities for Board Meetings as a possibility. The Chairperson advised that she would liaise with other public sector bodies to explore other options as well.

The Interim Director of Finance apologised to Members for the protracted technical difficulties experienced. She assured Members she would undertake to raise the issue with the appropriate officers.

Following on from this discussion Mr Quinn then proposed deferring any non-urgent Agenda items to the next scheduled Meeting of the Board. Mr Irvine seconded the proposal.

Further to the proposal to defer non-urgent Agenda items, the Interim Director of Finance asked for the listed Business Cases and the Delegated Limits paper to be considered for approval. **This was agreed.**

#### **Business Cases -**

- **Pomeroy Fire Station Refurbishment**
- **Ballynahinch Fire Station Refurbishment**
- **Waste Management Services**
- **Welfare Facilities Upgrade**
- **Fixed Wire Testing Remedial Programme**
- **Addendum for Command & Control Mobilising Solution**
- **Addendum for Laundry**

Members noted the Executive Summaries pertaining to the Business Cases for Pomeroy Fire Station Refurbishment; Ballynahinch Fire Station Refurbishment; Waste Management Facilities Upgrade; Fixed Wire Testing Remedial Programme; Addendum for Command & Control Mobilising Solution; and Addendum for Laundry.

Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Jennings highlighted that the majority of the projects listed above are capital and included in the capital budget, and noted that £1.25 million had been provided by DoH for backlog maintenance projects. He outlined that non-approval of the Business Cases today could affect the timeline in delivering the projects in-year, and also impact on spending the backlog maintenance funding by the timeframe stipulated by DoH.

Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Jennings answered Members' questions relating to affordability, how the figures are arrived at and the approvals process for Business Cases.

At this point, it was agreed to consider the Delegated Limits paper.

#### **Delegated Limits**

The Interim Director of Finance explained that the purpose of this paper is to brief Members on a recent uplift in NIFRS' delegation for the approval of capital Business Cases and to seek Board approval of a proposed corresponding increase to the delegation afforded to the Executive Leadership Team by the Board.

Members noted that NIFRS has been operating with a relatively low delegated limit of £250k for the approval of capital Business Cases since 2009. On 1 July 2021, the Department of Health wrote to the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer to increase NIFRS' delegation for the approval of capital Business Cases to £1.5m. This aligns NIFRS' level of delegation to the Health Trusts. Consistent with the Trusts, the delegated limit for IT projects would remain at £250k.

Members noted the recent increase in NIFRS delegation for capital expenditure is intended to expedite the approval process that in turn supports a more controlled management of its capital budgets.

The Interim Director of Finance highlighted that currently all Business Cases above £250k require Board approval which creates additional pressures in timeframes as the Board Meetings are bi-monthly. An increase to ELT's delegation will enable ELT to progress and manage spend of the capital budget, with Board oversight through reporting against the approved delegated authority level.

The Interim Director of Finance explained the governance and controls processes in place with respect to preparation of Business Cases.

The Interim Director of Finance outlined that in light of the recent finance review and the internal focus to improve the quality of Business Cases, along with benchmarking the approach in comparable organisations, she recommended that the NIFRS Board considers initially increasing the level of delegation for ELT to £1m for the approval of capital Business Cases with those cases greater than £250k being notified to the Board for information.

Mr O'Hanlon outlined that he was not content to approve the recommendation at this time until the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer has an opportunity to establish Accountability measures. The Chairperson concurred with Mr O'Hanlon but deferred to the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer for his view and to therefore seek his assurances on the Interim Director of Finance's recommendation.

Discussion took place with respect to ensuring Board oversight and a suggestion was proposed in the first place to establish a Board Working Group consisting of 2-3 Board Members who would have an oversight/quality assurance role, reporting to the Board.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer acknowledged Members' concerns and agreed with Members' comments around Board oversight and scrutiny.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer expressed concern with respect to the condition of NIFRS estate and asked Members to consider approving, in principle, whilst reserving the right to withdraw same, the recommendation of increasing the level of delegation for the Executive Leadership Team to £1m. This would be subject to a Board Working Group with an oversight/quality assurance role being established, to enable the Business Cases to be progressed. Based on the assurances given by the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer to Members -

**the Board unanimously agreed to approve the recommendation to increase the level of delegation for the Executive Leadership Team to £1m to enable the Business Cases to progress, subject to the establishment of a Board Working Group who would have an oversight/quality assurance role. Composition of the Board Working Group was agreed as the Chairs of all Committees. The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer would set this in motion and liaise with the Head of Performance, Planning and Governance and Director of Finance to activate this Group.**

**Item 5: Items for Information/Noting**

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

- **Service Delivery Committee - Minutes - 1 July 2021**
- **Audit, Risk & Governance Committee - Minutes - 2 July 2021**
- **Finance Report**
- **Update on Independent Review into Issues around the Investigation Processes and Timescales**
- **Performance Management**

**Item 6: Chairperson's Business**

**Item 7: Relevant Correspondence**

**Item 8: Documents for Sealing**

**Item 9: Schedule of Future Meetings, etc**

It was noted the above-mentioned items would be deferred until the scheduled Board Meeting on 30 November 2021.

The Chairperson suggested reconvening the Board Meeting to progress the Financial Plan on 26 October 2021 and any other pressing business following the RQIA session. **This was agreed by all Members.**

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer thanked Members for their patience and noted that a re-cap of his presentation to the Closed Board Session earlier that day would be presented to those Members separately who were unable to join the Closed Session.

The Chairperson thanked everyone for their contribution to the Meeting. She thanked Members for their patience and advised the Executives that it would be essential that the next meeting followed all the well-known and established protocols in terms of information flows to ensure that well informed decisions could be made by Members.

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THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS  
AND THE MEETING ENDED  
AT 5.00 PM

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