

NORTHERN IRELAND FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE BOARD

MINUTES OF A SPECIAL MEETING ISLAND CIVIC CENTRE, LISBURN

26 APRIL 2022

10.30 AM

PRESENT: Ms C McKinney, Chairperson presiding
Mr P O'Reilly, Chief Fire & Rescue Officer
Ms B Anley
Mr J Craig
Mr C Enright (*via video link*)
Mr K Henning
Mrs H Singleton
Ms L Smith (*via video link*)

APOLOGIES: Mr R Irvine
Mr T O'Hanlon
Mr J Quinn

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr P Harper, Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer (*via video link*)
Mr A Jennings, Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer
(Operations Delivery)
Mrs P White, Director of Corporate Services
Mrs D O'Connor, Interim Director of Human Resources
Miss D Reynolds, Head of Planning, Performance &
Governance
Ms I Hill, Governance & Business Support Services Advisor
Miss A Maguire, Personal Assistant
Mrs R Morgan, DoH Observer (*via video link*)

The Chairperson welcomed everyone to the Meeting. She extended a warm welcome back to Ms Hill.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, offered her condolences to Miss Maguire and her partner on their recent bereavement.

Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Jennings informed Members that 2 brothers of Station Commander Nigel McGuffin, Resilience Department, and Retired Firefighter Geoffrey McGuffin, Kilkeel Fire Station, had passed away suddenly over the past 10 days. The Chairperson asked Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Jennings to forward an address to enable her to send a letter of condolence on behalf of the Board to Station Commander McGuffin and his family circle.

Item 1: Apologies

Apologies noted as detailed above.

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.

Item 3: Update on Organisational Risk Position

Following a referral from the Special Service Delivery Committee Meeting held on 14 April 2022, the Chairperson asked the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer and the Executive Leadership Team to present to Members on the organisational risk position.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer referred to the impact on operational headcount and highlighted the significant reduction in Wholetime Firefighter headcount from 917 to 856. Currently at lowest level of 803. He referred to a former Chief Executive's correspondence, dated September 2014, to DoH in relation to budget savings and the removal of the 917 Wholetime establishment figure to give the Organisation more flexibility with respect to headcount. He noted DoH's acceptance of this at that time.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer outlined the areas that under-resourcing has significantly impacted on the capacity to address.

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At this point,
Ms Anley joined the Meeting (10.45 am)
due to connectivity issues

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The Chairperson summarised for Ms Anley's benefit the points made by the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer within the presentation to this point.

With respect to professional development of Firefighters – Station/Watch/Firefighter competency, the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer reported that the Executive Leadership Team would be meeting with the University of Ulster this week explore a joint approach on the development of a Professional Development Framework for NIFRS.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer deferred to the Director of Corporate Services who provided Members with an overview of the real reduction in budget since 2012/13.

The Director of Corporate Services reported that no agreed budget for 2022/23 has been received as yet from DoH but an indicative budget would be approximately £81.21m. She stated that NIFRS is not seeing any benefit of DoH budget growth apart from pay inflation.

The Director of Corporate Services reported that pay rises have been funded in full but that NIFRS has not been allocated any price inflation. She stated that DoH intends to look at NIFRS in line with the Health Family with respect to allocation of price inflation but likely to be around 2% rather than the 8% of price pressures currently being experienced.

The Director of Corporate Services informed Members of a valuable meeting that she and the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer had with DoH Director of Finance around NIFRS budget. The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer outlined that it would take £89m/£90m to get the Organisation back to where it was. Members asked for further information to be brought forward to the Board on the progress of meetings

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer explained that a significant area in which NIFRS can endeavour to deliver savings is to address the cost of sickness absence within the Organisation. He stated there are currently between 70 and 80 Wholetime Firefighters either on long-term sick or on modified duties. Members noted that while not the sole driver, this absence significantly impacts the level of overtime incurred by the Organisation to cover frontline crewing (£2.2m in 2021/22). Likewise, the cost of sickness within the On-Call staff group was £0.5m in 2021/22. The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer highlighted this needs to be addressed as part of a strategic plan and will not therefore be fixed in the immediate future. It was noted that savings generated through the reduction in sickness absence will not be cash releasing, but can in the future contribute to areas which are currently under-funded.

The Chairperson asked Members if they wished to move onto the next part of the presentation or if they had any questions with respect to the Finance section of the presentation.

The Director of Corporate Services answered Members' queries with respect to the impacts around the budget and in-year funding.

The Chairperson sought Mrs Morgan's views on the discussions held thus far and the potential for further conversations with respect to increasing NIFRS budget. She enquired as to the role of the Board in supporting the ELT to move those conversations on. She stated, however, that the Board accepts other organisations are in the same position however the Board was very much willing to add further value if required. Mrs Morgan outlined that the DoH Director of Finance is looking at a 3 year proposal for NIFRS. Members asked to have regular updates.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer commended the valuable and supportive relationships with DoH colleagues and the NIFRS Board and the personal support he had received since his appointment on 1st September.

Members stated there is a clear need for a fit for purpose operational model and the need to consider tangible ways to achieve this.
the presentation.

The Director of Corporate Services gave a summary of the posts the Executive Leadership Team viewed as critical and were not approved.

The Chairperson acknowledged the considerable amount of information presented and asked Members if there was anything specific in the presentation relating to posts deemed critical by the Executive Leadership Team which had been brought forward to them. She asked Members where there any specific areas they wished to focus on.

The Chairperson of the People & Culture Committee, referred to previously as the Resources Committee, advised that Officers had been asked to reduce the reliability of using Agency staff instead of filling posts substantively. He stated that at one point an Agency member of staff had been in post for 18 years. He pointed out that Agency staff should only be used as a stop gap until the post is substantively filled.

Members highlighted that the vision is for NIFRS to have a structure with every post filled with the minimum use of temporary staff; and with an adequate budget to fund the structure.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer outlined progressive discussions have taken place with respect to structures. He highlighted that the Executive Leadership Team structure is nearing completion and a Director of People & Culture had been appointed. He stated that progress is also being made with respect to the District Command structure.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer highlighted that a new risk model is near completion and that a 5-year Corporate Plan emanating from it would be presented to the Board in due course. Members welcomed this.

The Chairperson informed Members that DoH has confirmed an Independent Review of the Organisation, which would be carried out on behalf of DoH by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire Services and DoH Advisor, Robert Scott, who would be meeting with the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer, the Executive Leadership Team and Board Members. Members welcomed this and viewed the Review as an agreed way forward by all parties.

Members highlighted the need to look at robust processes around governance, reporting mechanisms and information flows to the Board. The Head of Planning, Performance & Governance confirmed that a review of reporting mechanisms and information flows is an action out of the Board Effectiveness exercise for the Board Working Group. The Review would also add value to that work.

Members highlighted the importance of the Board building relationships with the new Permanent Secretary and officials to ensure that the Board remains very much key going forward.

The Chairperson acknowledged that the new Permanent Secretary had agreed to meet the costs of the Review and this was welcomed given the funding request by the Board for a Review was not available 3 years ago. It was important however to point out that recommendations would probably also require financial assistance from DoH to address same. This had also been raised by the former Chief and the Executive Leadership Team when the 2019 bid had been submitted to DoH.

The Chairperson noted that the Chief and Executive Leadership Team has recently met with the Permanent Secretary on 14 April.

The Chairperson summarised next steps as discussed -

- Short-term action – the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer to continue conversations with DoH /DoF with regards to budget and resourcing and to report back in to the Board on progress. Members very willing to support in any way they could.
- Medium-term action – development of a strategic plan by the Executive Leadership Team working with the Board/DoH. Board planning Day Autumn.
- Long-term action – enactment of the strategic plan with key performance indicators in built.

Mrs Morgan confirmed that a Terms of Reference is being developed for the Review. She confirmed that Mr Scott would be in Belfast on 5 May 2022 to meet with DoH, the Board, the Executive Leadership Team and other stakeholders.

The Chairperson noted that Mr Scott is very open to the Board and Executive Leadership Team contributing their thoughts for the Terms of Reference.

Members would discuss this further at the closed session in the afternoon.

The Chairperson referred to the Annual Station Inspections. She noted that contact would be made with Members by Ms Hill with respect to arrangements for Members to visit over the next months.

Following an enquiry under Any Other Business from the Director of Corporate Services regarding succession planning, the Chairperson noted same and advised that the Board would be taking that discussion forward in closed session.

CFRO O' Reilly left the meeting (12.20 pm)
to attend a previously arranged engagement

The Chairperson closed the Meeting and thanked Members for their attendance and noted that it had been a very constructive meeting.

She highlighted that the Remuneration Committee Meeting is due to commence at 1.15 pm with the Closed Special Board Meeting commencing at 2.00 pm.

THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS
AND THE MEETING TERMINATED
AT 12.25 PM
