

NORTHERN IRELAND FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE BOARD

MINUTES OF A MEETING

29 FEBRUARY 2024

1.30 PM

PRESENT: Mr J Colville, Chairperson
Mr A Jennings, Chief Fire & Rescue Officer
Ms B Anley
Mr C Enright
Mr P Kennedy
Mr J Lennon
Mr T O'Hanlon
Mrs H Singleton
Ms L Smith

APOLOGIES: Mr J Craig
Mr R Irvine
Mr J Quinn

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr P Harper, Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer
Mr M Deeney, Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer
Mr B Stanfield, Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer
Mrs T Ramsay, Director of People & Culture
Mrs P White, Director of Finance & Support Services
Miss D Reynolds, Head of Planning, Performance & Governance
Mrs E Downey, Business Assurance & Improvement Manager
Ms I Hill, Governance & Business Support Services Advisor
Mrs L'V Montgomery, DoH Observer (*virtual*)
Ms A Flanagan, DoH Observer (*virtual*)

Prior to the commencement of business, the Chairperson noted that Mr Enright's tenure was ending that day after having completed his second term on the Board. He paid tribute to Mr Enright for his contribution and support over the past 8 years.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, and the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer, on behalf of Executive Leadership Team, made a presentation to Mr Enright to mark the occasion.

Item 1: Apologies

Apologies from Members were noted.

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. There were no apparent conflicts of interest declared.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer informed Members of the sad deaths of Watch Commander Stephen Barr, Ballynahinch Fire Station, and FireFighter Curtis Robinson, Knock Fire Station, and on behalf of the Board conveyed his condolences to their families.

Item 3: Minutes of Board Meetings

Meeting – 28 November 2023 Special Meeting – 11 January 2024

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 28 November 2023, and the Special Board Meeting held on 11 January 2024, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read and agreed as an accurate record, on the motion of Mr Lennon, seconded by Ms Anley.

Item 4: Standalone Strategic Items

DoH/NIFRS Partnership Agreement

Members noted a draft NIFRS-DoH Partnership Agreement which, in collaboration with DoH, had been developed in line with Department of Finance direction and a Department of Health (DoH) business target for 2023-24. Members also noted that the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee had considered the draft document at its Meeting on 22 February 2024 and agreed for escalation to the full Board.

The Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer provided a brief explanation of the process to date and the purpose of the Partnership Agreement which explains the overall governance framework within which NIFRS operates, including the framework through which the necessary assurances are provided to stakeholders; the relationship between DoH and NIFRS; and the roles/responsibilities of the partners.

The Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer noted the discussions at the Service Delivery Committee when it had been agreed that the draft Agreement be escalated to the Board. He outlined briefly the feedback which had been received from the Members of the Committee.

Mrs Montgomery thanked the Chairperson for the invitation to attend the Meeting as the Board is debating the draft Agreement and she was keen to be involved in the discussions.

Mrs Montgomery explained that the draft Partnership Agreement will replace the MSFM and noted that DoH had been working closely with ELT particularly the Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer and the Head of Planning, Performance & Governance. She stated the need for the Agreement to reflect the tripartite partnership between the Board, DoH and ELT.

Mrs Montgomery referred the HMI Report and also to the reference to the “lengthening of the arm” and stated that she welcomed the Board’s comments on how this could work in practice. She acknowledged that DoH had been observers at meetings for sometime now and also acknowledged the significant improvements around corporate governance. She informed Members that observers would no longer be routinely attending meetings and that going forwards attendance would be by invitation. She stated that DoH was accessible and there were clear lines for contact.

During discussion, Members welcomed the draft Partnership Agreement and the detail within. Members suggested the need to outline the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders to ensure clarity and commented on areas of the Agreement which needed to be strengthened. Mr Enright noted the discussion at the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee Meeting and asked for the Committee’s comments/ feedback to be forwarded. He stated his view that the lack of a vision for the future was a key piece missing from the Agreement. He outlined his continuing concerns with regard to in-year budgeting and its impact on transformation.

Ms Anley suggested the need to include wording around NIFRS’ statutory obligations versus funding requirements.

The Chairperson welcomed the Agreement as a conduit to further empowerment and progress.

Mrs Montgomery noted that the Committee’s comments had been sent through and noted the Minister’s position with regard to a longer-term budget. She stated that a one year budget should not prevent planning on a longer term basis.

Mr Lennon stated that a reference to the role of the Inspectorate would be welcome explaining that NIFRS needs to have that linkage. Whilst appreciating there is no role currently, he suggested the need to consider same.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer welcomed the Agreement but added that he wished to building on the existing working relationships with DoH. He referred to the Sections 9 and 10 relating to partnership working and commented positively on a recent meeting with Ms Flanagan, DoH’s lead official. He emphasised that the Agreement was a starting point from which to further strengthen build relationships.

During further discussion, Mrs Singleton welcomed the Agreement and commented in particular the collaborative working approach which she felt was already there and acknowledged the support of Mrs Montgomery. She referred to the sequencing of documents and enquired as to the current position with respect to a Fire Framework and also commented on the discussion with respect to the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer role who is a Board Member but also accountable to the Board.

The Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer informed Members that the queries/ comments received from the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee and from Board Members have been collated and will be forwarded to DoH for consideration.

The Chairperson sought approval for the draft Partnership Agreement subject to revision.

The Board, on the motion of Mr Kennedy, seconded by Mrs Singleton, unanimously agreed to approve the DoH/NIFRS Partnership Agreement subject to revisions as discussed.

The Chairperson noted that there will be options to review the Agreement going forward.

**Emergency Response Standards (ERS)
Including update on CRMP**

The Board noted that a Report on the new NIFRS Emergency Response Standard (ERS) proposals for public consultation was reviewed by the Service Delivery Committee on 21 February. The Committee recommends to the Board approval of the ERS proposals for public consultation.

At this point,
Mrs Montgomery and Ms Flanagan left the Meeting

Members noted the NIFRS ERS proposals for public consultation.

The Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer noted that the ERS proposals had been discussed in detail at a Board Workshop and noted the discussions previously. He stated that ERS was a key focus for the organisation and noted that the proposals had been considered by ELT, the CRMP Project Board and the Service Delivery Committee. He added that the Business Assurance & Improvement Manager was in attendance to present the proposals following which he would provide an update on CRMP.

The Business Assurance & Improvement Manager gave a presentation providing an overview of the project summary and the internal engagement process and approvals. She also provided an overview of the final ERS proposals which were being presented for approval.

The Chairperson welcomed the proposals and sought Members' approval.

The Board, on the motion of Mr O'Hanlon, seconded by Mr Lennon, unanimously approved NIFRS Emergency Response Standards (ERS) proposals for public consultation.

The Business Assurance & Improvement Manager outlined next steps noting the timetable for approvals and development of the consultation pack and public consultation timeline. Members noted that it is anticipated that consultation feedback would be presented to the Board in September for consideration with a target implementation date of 1 October 2024. The Business Assurance & Improvement Manager pointed out that if significant changes to ERS proposals are required then further public consultation will be needed.

During discussion, the Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer and the Business Assurance & Improvement Manager answered Members' questions/provided clarification relating to the public consultation exercise and also with respect to any potential resourcing implications with regard to the implementation timeline.

The Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer noted that the ERS proposals tied in with NIFRS CRMP and updated Members on progress. He noted that feedback from DoH had been received and clarity provided in relation to public consultation in light of the NI Executive being reformed and DoH Minister in place. He explained that the decision for public consultation is now with NIFRS. He highlighted that ELT, the CRMP Project Board and the Service Delivery Committee have supported the need for public consultation of CRMP.

Referring ~~the~~ to the public consultation, the Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer explained ELT's view that the CRMP publication date be extended to October 2024 and noted the potential need to change the initial 2023-2028 date range to 2024-2029. The Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer referred to the options for the sequencing of the public consultations, ie, fully completed CRMP followed by ERS; CRMP/ERS offset by a number of weeks; or simultaneously. He stated that simultaneous consultation was proposed and outlined assistance provided by NILGA and also noting Corporate Communications involvement to ensure a 'public friendly' approach is followed. He also explained the need for a clear separation between the 2 consultation exercises.

The Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer outlined the next step will be the development of the CRMP consultation pack and noted that DoH will require full and detailed documents to ensure that the Minister and DoH are fully briefed.

During a full discussion, the Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer answered Members' questions relating to the public consultation exercise process and the development of the consultation packs.

The Board, on the motion of Mr Lennon, seconded by Mr O'Hanlon, unanimously agreed that the CRMP date range be changed to 2024-2029; and that the public consultation exercises for CRMP and ERS be issued simultaneously ensuring that the consultations are distinct and separate.

Mrs Singleton, Chairperson of the Service Delivery Committee, noted the detailed discussion which had taken place and the clarifications sought at the Committee Meeting. She also noted that DoH had not indicated any problems.

Ms Anley asked that any slippage be reported through to the CRMP Project Board and the Service Delivery Committee.

ACTION: Schedule of Consultation dates to be shared with Members

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer expressed his thanks to the Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer in leading these projects and also to the Business Assurance & Improvement Manager for all her work.

Pension Matters

Draft NIFRS Pension Abatement Policy

The draft NIFRS Pension Abatement Policy – Firefighters’ Pension Schemes was noted. The Policy aligns NIFRS to the legislative change in April 2023 and was reviewed by the Pension Board at its meeting on 31 January 2024.

The Director Finance & Support Services outlined the background to the development and timeframe for the policy and noted the challenges regarding pension legislation. She gave an overview of the Policy and its purpose and advised Members of the legislation which empowers the NIFRS Board as Scheme Manager for the Firefighters’ Pension Schemes to apply pension abatement.

The Director of Finance & Support Services recommended that, subject to Board approval, the Policy be implemented with effect from 1 April 2024. She explained there is no intention to apply the Policy retrospectively and noted some issues currently relating to this.

Mrs Singleton, noted the discussion at a recent Audit, Risk & Governance Committee Meeting regarding information flows from the Pension Board to the NIFRS Board, and noted the need to formalise same. She sought assurance that there will be an update on the issues highlighted. She also enquired if the matter had been reviewed by Legal.

The Director of Finance & Support Services noted that the Policy had been reviewed by Legal. Referring to the Pension Board information flows, the Director of Finance & Support Services explained that the Pension Board will formally report to the NIFRS Board at the end of each year with any issues for the Board being presented through the appropriate forum, based on the nature of the issue to be addressed.

The Board, on the motion of Mr Lennon, seconded by Mr Kennedy, unanimously approved the draft NIFRS Pension Abatement Policy.

Pension Information Leaflets

Members noted the following Pension Information Leaflets which had been circulated for information:

- Pension Abatement – Firefighters’ Pension Schemes;
- Protected Pension Age – Firefighters’ Pension Scheme.

Business Case – Dunmurry Fire Station Lease

The Business Case for the Dunmurry Fire Station Lease was noted.

The Director of Finance & Support Services outlined the purpose of the Business Case explaining that NIFRS was currently not aware of the position of Dunmurry and any future requirements. She stated that it is proposed to extend the lease for a further 5 year period and explained that a break option will be requested from year 2 onwards. This break clause will allow flexibility to exit the lease should any changes be agreed to current procedures/Station locations with the CRMP and SAR documents.

The Board, on the motion of Ms Smith, seconded by Mr Lennon, unanimously approved the Business Case for the Dunmurry Fire Station Lease.

The Meeting adjourned at 2.55 pm for a comfort break

The Meeting reconvened at 3.05 pm

Finance Report

Members noted the Finance Report (updating Members on the financial position for the period ended 31 January 2024).

The Director of Finance & Support Services gave an overview of the salient points with respect to the Revenue budget. She highlighted that the year-to-date position suggests that a breakeven position at year end is achievable, however ELT will continue to be kept under review. She drew attention to the potential pressure with regard to ill-health retirement costs and explained that NIFRS was working closely with DoH to fund this pressure.

During discussion the Officers answered Members' questions relating to the revenue budget, including overtime profiling, attendance management, recruitment and the underspends in Support staff and operating expenditure. The Director of Finance & Support Services advised Members that an additional recurrent budget allocation had been received to fund the Support staff pay award.

Referring to the Capital budget, the Director of Finance & Support Services noted the the spend to date. She explained that ELT is confident that we fully utilise our budget and have notified DoH that we would have the capacity to absorb further budget of around £1.6m. She advised Members that NIFRS had subsequently received an additional allocation of £1.1m which allows the Service to bring forward delivery of fleet.

The Director of Finance & Support Services answered Members' questions/provided clarification relating to the information presented.

The Director of Finance & Support Services reported positively with respect to Prompt Payment compliance and noted the current position with regard to Business Case approvals.

Mr O'Hanlon declared a potential conflict of interest with respect to any information relating to BSO.

LDC Cookstown Resourcing Requirements (Support Staff)

The Director of People & Culture noted a discussion at the People & Culture Committee Meeting with regard to resourcing requirements for LDC Cookstown – this related to additional support roles for which there is no funding currently to commence recruitment of these roles. She noted that NIFRS does not have the delegated authority to appointment personnel above establishment.

The Director of People & Culture explained that other options were explored but none of the options were sustainable. She noted that a paper on the resourcing requirement aligned to the appropriate reports, etc, to support the rationale for the posts had been submitted to DoH but not feedback had been received as yet. She noted that the recruitment exercise for these posts was ready should same be able to proceed.

Ms Smith, Chairperson of the People & Culture Committee informed the Meeting that the Committee had noted the affordability issue and had supported the proposal in principle subject to the matter to be escalated to the the full Board on 29 February 2024.

Health & Safety Update

Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Deeney updated Members in relation to the vehicle accident involving Cadogan fire appliance on 16 January 2024. He also updated Members on the current position with respect to NIFRS employees and the welfare of the individuals involved.

Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Deeney also noted ~~explained~~ the Accident Investigation had been completed and lessons learnt identified and actioned.

During discussion, Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Deeney answered Members' questions relating to various aspects including, lessons learned. He assured Members that any training implications will be considered and taken forward as appropriate.

Strategic Performance Indicators (SPIs)

The Strategic Performance Report for the period up to 31 December 2023 was noted.

Item 5: Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to Mr Enright's presentation earlier and noted that Robert Irvine's tenure was ending that day having also completed his second term on the Board. He noted that he and the Chief Fire & Rescue Officer had ~~had~~ made a presentation to Mr Irvine previously. The Chairperson paid tribute to Mr Irvine for his contribution and support to the organisation for almost 8½ years.

LDC Programme Board – Board Representative

Members will be aware that Robert Irvine's tenure ends on 29 February and as such we will have a vacancy for the Board Representative on the LDC Programme Board. Nominations will be sought for a Member to undertake this role.

Mr O'Hanlon acknowledged Mr Enright and Mr Irvine's contribution to the organisation. He also noted of Mr Irvine's active involvement in the work of the LDC Programme Board.

Mr O'Hanlon proposed that Jim Lennon be appointed to undertake the role of the Board's Representative on the LDC Programme Board. Ms Smith seconded this proposal.

Board Health & Safety Champion

Members noted that the Board Effectiveness Working Group will determine the need for the Health & Safety champion and, if confirmed, will be managed under Standing Order 2.6 and confirmed at the next Meeting.

Funding for HMI Recommendations, etc

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer updated Members on meetings with the DoH representative in relation to funding for critical posts and the fourth PO role and noted that feedback was awaited from DoH.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer also updated Members on a meeting with the Permanent Secretary relating to the LDC Cookstown.

Members enquired as to the potential to develop a business case to assist with the critical posts and resourcing at LDC. The Director of Finance & Support Services explained that the affordability paper developed is the business case. She stated that this paper was key and had been discussed previously and noted the requirement for more detail.

Mr O'Hanlon supported the need to develop a specific business case and the need to flag the impact of not filling posts on the LDC project.

Board Task & Finish Group

The Chairperson noted the position with respect to the work progressed through the Task & Finish Group.

The Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer noted that DoH have an Independent Review which supports some initiatives but pointed out that there other initiatives requiring support under the wider wrap around of improvement.

Mrs Singleton pointed out the need for all posts to be consolidated in one paper and enquired if DoH had an overview of all NIFRS requirements.

The Director of Finance & Support Services stated that NIFRS has same and explained that a paper relating to 8 of the posts had already been submitted and that 2 posts relating to LDC Cookstown were included.

Mrs Singleton suggested that this information be collated in one paper in a prioritised list.

The Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer highlighted that posts were listed in a spreadsheet and in presentations communicated to DoH.

At this point,
Ms Anley left the Meeting

Item 6: Reports from Board Committees, Noting of Committee Minutes and Adoption of Committee Recommendations

Audit, Risk & Governance Committee Minutes – 21 September 2023

The Minutes of the Audit, Risk Committee Meeting held on 21 September 2023 were noted. Members also noted that the recommendations contained therein were adopted by the Board at its Meeting on 26 September 2023.

Audit, Risk & Governance Committee Minutes – 23 November 2023

The Minutes of the Audit, Risk Committee Meeting held on 23 November 2023 were noted. Members further noted that the recommendations contained therein were adopted by the Board at its Meeting on 28 November 2023.

Audit, Risk & Governance Committee Meeting – 22 February 2024

Members noted that a Meeting of the Audit, Risk Committee Meeting had been held on 22 February 2024 and the Minutes of the Meeting will be presented to a future Meeting of the Board.

Mr Enright, Audit, Risk & Governance Committee Member, gave an overview of the key business discussed at the Meeting, including the Partnership Agreement and Pension Board information flows. He noted in particular discussion with respect to the External Audit Plan and the potential delay of certification of the Annual Accounts until October. He explained that the Committee had expressed their concerns with respect to this delay and had asked the Director of Finance & Support Services and KPMG to reconsider the proposed timetable.

The Board, on the motion of Mr Lennon, seconded by Mr O’Hanlon, unanimously agreed to adopt the undernoted recommendations emanating from the Meeting.

Audit, Risk & Governance - Recommendations

- **Approval of the Final Report To Those Charged With Governance (RTTCWG) 2022/23;**
- **Approval of the 2023/24 External Audit Strategy covering NIFRS Operational Account and NIFRS Pension Accounts;**
- **Approval of the deferral of the Business Continuity Management Audit and Organisational Development Audit from 2023/24 until 2024/25;**
- **Approval of the Audit of NOG – Breathing Apparatus Project Management, Audit of Management of Control Room and Audit of RCI - Substantive Follow-up;**
- **Approval of the Internal Audit Strategy including Audit Plan 2024/25.**

The Chairperson thanked Mr Enright for chairing the Audit, Risk & Governance Meeting on this occasion.

People & Culture Committee – Minutes – 20 September 2023

The Minutes of the People & Culture Committee Meeting held on 20 September 2023 were noted. Members further noted that the recommendations contained therein were adopted by the Board at its Meeting on 26 September 2023.

People & Culture Committee – Minutes – 22 November 2023

The Minutes of the People & Culture Committee Meeting held on 22 November 2023 were noted. Members further noted that the recommendation contained therein was adopted by the Board at its Meeting on 28 November 2023.

People & Culture Committee – Meeting – 21 February 2024

Members noted that a Meeting of the People & Culture Committee had been held on 12 February 2024 and the Minutes of the Meeting will be presented at a future Meeting of the Board.

At this point,
Mr Enright left the Meeting

Ms Smith, Chairperson of the People & Culture Committee, gave a brief synopsis of the key business discussed at the Meeting including updates on safeguarding, implementation of the Wholetime Transfer Policy and the ~~Recruitment Plan~~ Recruitment Plan. She noted that the Committee had received an overview of the Online Induction system and reported positively on same.

At this point,
CFRO Jennings and DCFRO Harper left the Meeting

Service Delivery Committee – Minutes – 20 September 2023

The Minutes of the Service Delivery Committee Meeting held on 20 September 2023 were noted. Members further noted that the recommendation contained therein was adopted by the Board at its Meeting on 26 September 2023.

Service Delivery Committee – Minutes – 22 November 2023

The Minutes of the Service Delivery Committee Meeting held on 22 November 2023 were noted. Members further noted that the recommendation contained therein was adopted by the Board at its Meeting on 26 September 2023.

Service Delivery Committee – Meeting – 21 February 2024

Members noted that a Meeting of the Service Delivery Committee had been held on 21 February 2024 and the Minutes of the Meeting will be presented at a future Meeting of the Board.

Mrs Singleton, Chairperson of the Service Delivery Committee, gave an overview of the business discussed highlighting that a key item of business related to NIFRS Emergency Response Standards and it had been agreed that the proposals be escalated to the Board, as discussed earlier in the Board Meeting. She noted a Health & Safety update would be a standing item on the Agenda of the Committee going forward. Mrs Singleton reported positively on a Briefing Paper providing an update on the work of the Contaminants Working Group and explained that a video had also been presented to the Committee which provided some awareness and understanding of contaminants and the speed of transmission. She suggested that the video presentation be shared with the full Board for information.

Mrs Singleton highlighted that the Committee had noted the exemplary service provided by NIFRS personnel at 2 extremely challenging incidents – an incident Templepatrick involving a train which had caught fire where Fire Crews had assisted passengers out of the train and escorted them to safety. The second related to an incident in Dunraven Park where a child of 4 had been rescued from a house fire. Mrs Singleton commended the Firefighters and support teams who attended these incidents and who worked diligently and in an exemplary manner to protect the local community.

Mrs Singleton also commended Watch Commander Tommy Torbitt who was awarded the King's Fire Service Medal (KFSM) in the 2023 New Year's Honours list having served the Fire Service for over 48 years.

Remuneration Committee – Minutes – 21 September 2023

The Minutes of the Remuneration Committee Meeting held on 21 September 2023 were noted. Members further noted that the recommendations contained therein were adopted by the Board at its Meeting on 26 September 2023.

Remuneration Committee - Minutes – 28 November 2023

The Minutes of the Remuneration Committee Meeting held on 28 November 2023 were noted. Members further noted that the recommendations contained therein were adopted by the Board at its Meeting on 28 November 2023.

Item 7: Relevant Correspondence

There was no relevant correspondence.

Item 8: Documents for Sealing

There were no documents for sealing.

Item 9: March-May 2024 Key Dates

A provisional schedule of key dates for March to May 2024 was noted.

The Chairperson noted that 15 March was a key date with a Special Board Meeting, a meeting of the Board Effectiveness Working Group and Industrial Relations Training scheduled.

The Chairperson thanked all for their attendance.

THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS
AND THE MEETING TERMINATED
AT 4.30 PM
