

NORTHERN IRELAND FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE BOARD

MINUTES OF A MEETING

25 JUNE 2024

2.15 PM

PRESENT: Mr J Colville, Chairperson
Mr A Jennings, Chief Fire & Rescue Officer
Ms B Anley
Mr J Craig
Mr P Kennedy
Mr J Lennon
Mr J Quinn
Mrs H Singleton
Ms L Smith

APOLOGIES: Mrs L Devlin
Mr C Mallaghan

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr P Harper, Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer
Mr M Deeney, 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
Ms I Hill, Governance & Business Support Services Advisor
Mrs E-L Lowe, Graphic Design & Web Advisor
Ms J Hutchinson, Senior Management Accountant
Mr P Cowan, Economic Advisor

Item 1: Apologies

Apologies from Members were noted. It was also noted that no communication had been received from Mr O'Hanlon.

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.

Mr Quinn declared an interest with respect to Item 4 – Industrial Action. There were no other apparent conflicts of interest declared.

Item 3: Minutes of Board Meetings Meeting – 28 May 2024

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 28 May 2024, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read and agreed as an accurate record, subject to amendments on the motion of Mr Kennedy, seconded by Ms Smith.

Item 4: Standalone Strategic Items

CRMP Update

The Deputy Chief Fire & Rescue Officer (DCFRO) gave a verbal update on the business of the recent CRMP Project Board meeting particularly in relation to the public consultation documentation.

The DCFRO introduced Mrs Lowe, Graphic Design & Web Advisor within Corporate Communications, to the meeting. He explained the importance of having a fully accessible document on the NIFRS website in order to meet Equality Commission requirements.

Mrs Lowe provided Members an overview of the CRMP consultation draft visuals for the consultation landing page on the NIFRS website.

The DCFRO explained that the statistical information and Area Council alignment maps had been updated since the previous Board approvals.

The DCFRO thanked Mrs Lowe for her help and assistance.

At this point,
Mrs Lowe left the Meeting

Mr Kennedy enquired as to the timeline for receiving consultation feedback. The DCFRO explained that timelines are dependent upon DoH approval noting that it will be a 12-week consultation period during which there will also be stakeholder engagement sessions.

During discussion, the DCFRO answered Members' questions relating to the consultation exercise; engagement with other organisations with respect to CRMP and ERS; and updated Members on progress in relation to the ERS consultation and the Area Council alignment project.

Mr Lennon referred to the next item of business relating to the Financial Plan and enquired if will impact on CRMP. The DCFRO stated it will have impact but there maybe slippage.

The DCFRO provided a brief update on other CRMP projects. He updated Members in particular with regard to a new project around the Economic & Social Value (ESV) of NIFRS. He explained that the project will be taken forward in 2 phases and that it is hoped to bring a paper to the September Board Meeting.

Before considering the next item of business, the Chairperson expressed his shock at the sad news of the death of the former Chairperson Ms Carmel McKinney and extended condolences to her husband Paul and family.

Mr Quinn left the Meeting for the next item of Business

Industrial Action – Mitigation Planning Options

Members noted the Briefing Paper outlining Industrial Action Mitigation Planning Options.

The Chief Fire & Rescue Officer (CFRO) gave an overview of the background to the paper emphasizing its purpose. He noted that in England & Wales, Fire and Rescue Authorities, as Category 1 Responders, are required under the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) to maintain and test Business Continuity Plans (BCP) in preparation for a range of risks, including industrial action. He pointed out that NIFRS is not a Category 1 responder, however there is an expectation that the same level of assurance should be provided in Northern Ireland. He also advised Members that currently NIFRS does not have Business Continuity Plans that will provide a level of assurance to provide emergency response in the event of industrial action.

The CFRO informed Members that NIFRS has detailed a series of options to meet Home Office expectations for consideration. He provided a detailed overview of the 7 options considered noting the risks and any potential costs.

The DCFRO explained the need for clear and reasonable methodology to mitigate any industrial action. He noted that the Briefing Paper had been circulated for awareness at today's meeting. He explained that options 3, 6 and 7 are to be explored further.

During discussion, the CFRO and DCFRO answered Members' questions relating to aspects of the information presented.

The Board, on the motion of Mr Lennon, seconded by Mrs Singleton gave approval to the Executive Leadership Team to progress a more detailed investigation into the viability of options 3, 6 & 7.

Members noted that it is anticipated that an outcome report will be presented to the Board on the shortlisted options to determine the direction of travel that needs to be progressed to put in place sufficient arrangements to maintain business continuity during periods of strike action.

At this point,
Ms Hutchinson and Mr Cowan joined
and Mr Quinn re-joined
the Meeting

CAPS Business Case

The CAPS (Crewing and Payments System) Business Case and Executive Summary were noted.

The Director of Finance & Support Services provided an explanation of the project scope and its purpose. She further explained that the Business Case is seeking to update approvals in relation to the NIFRS On-Call Time and Wholetime Rostering Project which was approved on 23 April 2021 and also explained why the project is now outside the original Departmental approvals.

The Director of Finance & Support Services drew Member's attention to Table 1 in the Business Case which provides an example the management tasks that take place on an On-Call station and the costs of processing claims manually. She outlined the benefits of CAPS highlighting that it will bring significant savings.

The Director of Finance & Support Services provided an overview of the options including the additional benefits of an enhanced, integrated HR and LMS functionality to replace existing systems (circa 80% of HR, all LMS except eLearning content and some core functionality in PHAROS) and mitigate need for potential future move to new sophisticated HR solution. She noted the key interdependency is HR data and explained that the ongoing HR data cleansing project is part of the preparation for the CAPS project.

The Director of Finance & Support Services summarised the options appraisal noting that Option 6 was the preferred option. Referring to the affordability analysis, she explained that whilst the project will bring savings over time the first year will be challenging.

With regard to procurement, the Director of Finance & Support Services advised Members that the system can be procured via the Crown Commercial Framework and noted the project timelines.

During discussion, the Director of Finance & Support Services answered Members' questions/provided clarification regarding the information presented including project resilience and how it can be tested, cyber security as it is an off site system, procurement of the system and budgeting for the project.

Mrs Singleton noted that the contract for the Gartan system expires in December 2025 and enquired if the timelines for the new contract could be brought forward to September/October 2025. She pointed out the need to have assurance by 31 December 2025.

The Director of Finance & Support Services explained that a test site will be part of the procurement exercise and the implementation of the system. She added that project implementation by December 2025 will be a challenge if approval timelines slip.

In response to a question from Mr Quinn in relation financial stability checks for the potential contractor, the Director of Finance & Support Services undertook to seek legal advice with regard to financial stability.

ACTION: Director of Finance & Support Services to seek legal advice with regard to the matter of financial stability.

The Board, on the motion of Mr Lennon, seconded by Mr Craig unanimously agreed to approve the CAPS Business Case.

Term Service Short Contract Business Case

Members noted the Term Service Short Contract Business Case and associated Executive Summary.

The Director of Finance & Support Services noted that the Business Case pertained to the Contract for the delivery of Estates Maintenance Services through an Estates Term Service Short Contract (TSSC). This contract is required for the continued to maintenance of NIFRS estate and infrastructure, in accordance with relevant statutory legislation.

The Director of Finance & Support Services referred to the Executive Summary and noted the objectives of the Business Case. She also provided an overview of the shortlisted options outlining the preferred option. With respect to affordability, the Director of Finance & Support Services explained the budget pressure of £3.8m (both for the additional posts and contract spend) will be reviewed annually within the wider planning process each year which allocates budget in line with a break-even plan. It is widely accepted that the budget allocation is normally not reflective of the full need which is a challenge.

The Director of Finance & Support Services gave an overview of the procurement process and also noted the timelines to progress the Business Case.

It was noted that the preferred option was not stated in the Executive Summary but would be amended in the full Business Case.

The Board, on the motion of Mr Kennedy, seconded by Mrs Singleton, unanimously agreed to approve the Term Service Short Contract Business Case.

At this point,
Mr Cowan left the Meeting

Financial Plan

Members noted the draft Financial Plan.

The Chairperson provided Members with an overview of the business discussed, particularly with regard to budget, at the Accountability Meeting which had taken place earlier in June. He noted it was accepted that there were challenges with the budgets across all ALBs and that NIFRS has a duty of care to deliver the Fire Services Order and to breakeven.

The Chairperson noted the Permanent Secretary's discussion around areas of low, medium, high and catastrophic risk impacts and the expectation of the need to look at what you can do without, but not to move into areas which have a catastrophic impact on service delivery.

The CFRO also commented on the meeting pointing out that they had worked through the financial pressures clearly identifying the shortfall. He noted that the draft Financial Plan had been developed prior to the Accountability Meeting and explained that the Plan will be adjusted to reflect the discussions.

The Chairperson commented that the minute of that Accountability Meeting will be important to the Board.

Ms Anley asked the CFRO if, as Accounting Officer, he had considered writing to the Departmental Accounting Officer setting out the concerns in relation to funding and meeting NIFRS' statutory obligations to break even and to provide a safe and effective fire and rescue service.

The CFRO confirmed that a letter will be forwarded along with the assessment of risk of impacts being considered by ELT. Ms Anley stated her view that the CFRO, in his Accounting Officer role, needed to formally flag the concerns with respect to budget pressures.

The DCFRO stressed the need for the risk assessment to be completed based on their professional opinion and stated that NIFRS should not be compared to other entities. He also pointed out the need to be careful of the repercussive nature of any actions taken.

Mrs Singleton pointed out that the definition of catastrophic can't be defined by the organisation, it needs to be a standard definition as defined by DoH. She enquired if the Chairperson/CFRO had got written commitment of support from the Permanent Secretary.

The Chairperson explained that the minutes of the Accountability Meeting had just been received and will be reviewed. He stated if that commitment had not been noted he would ask for same to be reflected within the minutes.

Mr Quinn commented that NIFRS only receives additional funding when deemed unsafe and stressed that public and firefighter safety is vital. He highlighted the impact of stopping recruitment on key priorities such as CRMP. Mr Quinn stated that he felt today was an initial discussion regarding the budget and that there will need to be further discussions on the matter. He also pointed out the need to examine the medium and long term impacts and likelihood of recovery.

The CFRO noted that if NIFRS is required to make changes this would under normal circumstances be conducted under a consulted CRMP and highlighted in this case there may be no consultation.

In response to a query from Mr Quinn as to whether there is a budget allocation for 2024/25, the Director of Finance & Support Services noted this had not been received as yet. She explained that NIFRS had started at a flat budget position as opposed to a cut position as in the case with the Trusts. She further explained that the Plan had been drafted with a baseline of £93.5m. She outlined where the reductions had been made emphasising that ELT is not confident that the produced reductions are achievable.

The Director of Finance & Support Services explained that following a high level review, the budget need is £101m. In line with previous years, an exercise was undertaken to identify areas where budget could be further reduced to minimise additionality that would be required to breakeven. The resultant outcome was a residual pressure of £4.1m. This outcome protected headcount at the agreed Establishment levels. Members noted that 83% of the 2024/25 NIFRS budget is pay. This leaves only £16.3m of budget for the day-to-day running of Organisation as well as trying to support Service Improvement and modernisation. Members further noted that the £95.3m opening budgetary requirement for 2024/25 does not include pay inflation as it has been assumed this will be funded in line with Departmental discussions.

The Director of Finance & Support Services drew Members' attention to the section of the Plan relating to the 2024/25 overhead pressures. She provided a detailed overview of the main overhead reductions (and resultant pressures) against organisational need.

The CFRO gave an overview of the service delivery elements of the Plan and the assumptions. He stressed the need for action against reducing headcount as it will impact on service delivery and will not achieve the required savings. He also highlighted the impact of reducing numbers on the ability to extract for training which will be more difficult and result in different set of issues.

A discussion followed around the impact of not recruiting operationally and also with respect to the ability to deliver training and overtime costs. Members considered the impact of this to be too severe. The Director of Finance & Support Services stressed the need to protect trainers/NOG/prevention & protection officers as they support health & safety considerations. The Director of People & Culture pointed out that it takes 2 years to recover from removing recruitment.

Ms Smith enquired if CRMP could be escalated and actions brought forward to make savings. The DCFRO explained that CRMP is a holistic approach to provide evidence and data to assist in the reviews such as a red fleet. He also pointed out the need to for externally validated data.

Mr Kennedy enquired as to the possibility of income generation from LDC and the ability to move away from Boucher. The Director of Finance & Support Services provided an explanation of the assumptions made with respect to the Boucher site noting if the site is disposed off it will contribute to the £2.1m deficit.

During further discussion, Mr Quinn stressed the need for the organisation to be more robust and to strengthen the narrative around impacts and the longer term implications. He stated that he could not support the Plan in its current format as the organisation will be less safe under these proposals.

Members, from a governance perspective, noted the need to collectively consider the draft Plan and what is best for the organisation going forward but the Board essentially is being forced into a position but yet is still accountable. Members commented that they were uncomfortable with that position.

The CFRO thanked Members for their comments. For context he noted that on leaving the Accountability Meeting the key piece of work to be undertaken was clear and that this had now largely been completed. He added that the draft Plan was not the final product and required further development before submission to DoH by 12 July.

The Chairperson stated that Members are welcome to provide further commentary regarding the Plan and added that he was content to convene a further Board Meeting.

ACTION: Board Meeting (via Zoom) to be scheduled following additional actions.

Health & Safety Update

The CFRO noted that a Health & Safety Performance Report had been presented to the Service Delivery Committee along with the Health & Safety Culture Themes for 2024. He noted that the 4 Health & Safety Themes were seatbelts; red lights; speed and RTC equipment.

The CFRO noted the current position with respect to the reviewing of Health & Safety Policies. He also informed Members the Health & Safety Audit had received a satisfactory outcome and noted that the Audit report will be presented to the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee Meeting in September.

ACTION: Health & Safety Report to be shared with Board Members.

SharePoint for Board Members

The Head of Planning, Performance & Governance gave an overview of the decision to develop a SharePoint for Board Members and explained what this will mean for Members.

Item 5: Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson updated Members on an Industrial Tribunal which had now concluded.

Accountability Meeting

The Chairperson noted that this had been discussed previously during the Meeting.

Away Day for Board Members

The Chairperson informed Members of a potential Board Away Day in July/August and stated that he will be seeking Members' availability in due course.

Board Effectiveness Working Group

The Chairperson updated Members on the business discussed at the Board Effectiveness Working Group meeting held that morning.

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

Audit, Risk & Governance Committee - Minutes – 22 February 2024

The Minutes of the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee Meeting held on 22 February 2024 were noted. Members further noted that the recommendations contained therein were adopted by the Board at its Meeting on 29 February 2024.

People & Culture Committee - Minutes – 21 February 2024

The Minutes of the People & Culture Committee Meeting held on 21 February 2024 were noted.

Service Delivery Committee - Minutes – 21 February 2024

The Minutes of the Service Delivery Committee Meeting held on 21 February 2024 were noted.

Service Delivery Committee - Meeting – 29 May 2024

Members noted that a Meeting of the Service Delivery Committee Meeting had been held on 29 May 2024 and that the Minutes will be presented to a future Board Meeting.

Mrs Singleton, Chairperson of the Service Delivery Committee, provided a synopsis of the business discussed at the Meeting noting that the Committee recommended approval of the draft ERS public consultation paper. She also reported on the positive updates received with respect to Health & Safety; the Digital Radio Project; the implementation of the new False Alarm Policy following the first 2 months of implementation and RCI.

Mrs Singleton referred to NOG and the 3-year alignment plan and noted that there was already slippage against the plan due to increases in workloads. She further noted the Committee's concerns about NIFRS' ability to meet the plan and deliver same. Mrs Singleton stressed the need for Board to have oversight of the matter.

The CFRO acknowledged there was slippage explaining there were a number of key areas being addressed. He noted that at the September Meeting of the Service Delivery Committee there will be an update on the delivery of guidance. He assured Members that steps are being taken to align training.

ACFRO Deeney acknowledged that training resources remain a challenge, however, he noted that training is progressing albeit slower than ELT would wish. He updated Members on the current position with respect to LDC Trainers explaining that there remains a gap in terms of resources.

Ms Smith stated that a written report to clarify the current position and setting out where NIFRS wishes to get to and the risks, etc to achieving same would be appreciated. Members agreed to this.

ACTION: Update report with respect to NOG to be brought forward to the September Meeting.

The Board unanimously agreed to adopt the following recommendation emanating from the Meeting.

Service Delivery Recommendation

- ***Approval of the draft Public Consultation Paper on NIFRS Emergency Response Standards.***

Remuneration Committee – Minutes – 23 April 2024

The Minutes of the Remuneration Committee Meeting held on 23 April 2024 were noted. It was also noted that the recommendations contained therein were adopted by the Board at its Meeting on 28 May 2024.

Remuneration Committee – Meeting – 18 June 2024

Members noted that a Meeting of the Remuneration Committee Meeting had been held on 18 June 2024 and that the Minutes will be presented to a future Board Meeting.

The Chairperson noted the key business discussed at the Meeting.

Following discussion, the Board unanimously agreed to adopt the following recommendations emanating from the Meeting.

Remuneration Committee – Recommendations

- ***Approval of the 2024/25 Pay Remits for Wholetime Personnel; On-Call Personnel; and RCC Personnel, and onward submission of the documentation to DoH for final approval;***
- ***Approval of the re-graded roles which have been formally job evaluated in line with current policy;***
- ***Approval of job evaluation outcomes of new posts to support progression of recruitment;***
- ***Approval to proceed with job matching process that is extant in current policy, namely Organisational Change Policy, and on a temporary basis until formal approval is sought from the Department of Health for the amendment to grade.***

Item 7: Relevant Correspondence

There was no relevant correspondence.

Item 8: Documents for Sealing

There were no documents for sealing.

Item 9: September 2024 Key Dates

A provisional schedule of key dates for September 2024 was noted.

Any Other Business

Mr Craig commended operational colleagues for their professional management of the recent Hilden Mill fire commenting on the excellent management of health & safety.

Outstanding Minutes

Mr Lennon enquired whether the outstanding Minutes from the previous Meeting would be tabled for approval today. It was agreed that these would be brought forward to the September Meeting.

ACTION: Outstanding Minutes to be presented to the September Board Meeting for ratification.

‘Daily Digest’

The Director of People & Culture made Members aware of an intention to include the Board in the Daily Digest circulation list from week commencing 22 July 2024. She provided an update on the ‘Daily Digest’ and the benefits for Board Members.

THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS
AND THE MEETING TERMINATED
AT 5.10 PM
