

**MINUTES OF THE OFMDFM DEPARTMENTAL BOARD MEETING
ON 14 FEBRUARY 2005**

PRESENT: Nigel Hamilton, Dorothy Angus, Mary Bunting,
Frank Cushnahan, Rosalie Flanagan, George Gray,
Stephen Grimason, Denis McCartney,
Greg McConnell, Peter Smyth, Paul Sweeney.

IN ATTENDANCE: Mark Higgins (Secretary)

APOLOGIES: None.

Minutes of Last Meeting

1. The minutes of the Departmental Board meeting on 10 January 2005 were agreed as amended.

Matters Arising

2. Matters arising were dealt with under the appropriate scheduled agenda items.

Standing Items

3. **(a) Assembly Issues**

Rosalie Flanagan provided an outline on the latest position in respect of the political situation in the context of devolution. George Gray provided a synopsis of the legislative programme which included a substantial workload leading up to the Easter period.

- (b) Departmental Board Forward Plan**

The Board reviewed the new 2005 plan and agreed changes to the scheduling of items in March, April and May 2005. It was also agreed that a Departmental Brief would be not be prepared for the main summer leave months of July and August and Central Management Unit would amend the plan accordingly. **Action: Central Management Unit.**

(c) Finance, Accountability and Risk

Paul Sweeney tabled a paper on (a) Outturn Information for April-December 2004, and updates on (b) In-year January monitoring and (c) Budget 2004. The Board noted that the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) have asked Departments to identify and declare all reduced requirements in the February Monitoring Round and no additional resource allocations will be considered. The Department will declare the reduced requirements identified in its internal January monitoring exercise. The Department's Efficiency Technical Notes (ETNs) and Executive Summary have been cleared by Ministers. DFP are seeking Ministerial approval to publish all Departmental ETNs on the Priorities and Budget and Departmental websites.

The ETNs consolidate the Department's efficiencies including the Department's commitment to staffing reductions across the Department over the Budget period, and aligns with workforce planning requirements as agreed in Budget 2004. The opportunity to refine ETNs will be provided through monitoring rounds during the 2005-06 financial year.

(d) Freedom of Information (FOI)

Dorothy Angus provided an update on progress, including an outline on the type and number of requests received to date and reported a good attendance at Grade 7 training with 96% of attendees rating the FOI training as excellent. The meeting recorded its appreciation to the work of the Information Management Unit, Chris Stewart and Caroline Webb on the additional FOI work they had handled in recent months.

4 (a) A Shared Future

Mary Bunting provided a synopsis of "A Shared Future", the policy and strategic framework for good relations in Northern Ireland.

Minister John Spellar completed a round of discussions with political parties, Church leaders and voluntary groups. Officials are currently engaged in focused discussions with key stakeholders including the social partners, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, Community Relations Council, voluntary and community sector and local government.

She explained that the aim was to publish the policy and strategic framework before Easter with a triennial Action Plan to be published in the Autumn. Nigel Hamilton will chair an inter-departmental group to develop this first plan. The way forward included a more representative Community Relations Council and a key role for local Councils.

The Board discussed and commended the paper, "A Shared Future" for its high quality and recognised the important and difficult issues it addressed and the challenges faced by all concerned in implementing the policy and strategic framework for good relations in Northern Ireland.

4 (b) Review of Public Administration

Greg McConnell reported that, in November 2004, following consultation with the main political parties, Minister Ian Pearson requested further work on local identity. The results of this research will help inform the next consultation document, due to be launched on 22 March 2005. The document will contain consultative proposals for health and education structures, as well as options for reform of local government and public bodies, including non-departmental public bodies.

4 (c) A Guide to Public Appointments

Dorothy Angus briefed members on the recent publication of an "Applicants Guide" to public appointments. Copies of the guide were

distributed to members at the meeting and Directors agreed to promote its use throughout their business areas. **Action: Directors.**

4(d) Buckingham Palace Garden Parties 2005 – State Nominees

Dorothy Angus briefed members on a request for two staff nominations from the Department for one of three Garden parties at Buckingham Palace in July 2005. Directors were asked to provide nominations to Corporate Services Division by 18 February and Nigel Hamilton proposed that consideration should be given to those staff that had achieved good work in difficult circumstances.

5. Tour de Table

There were no updates from Directors.

6. Any Other Business

6(a) Departmental Staff Conference 2005

Dorothy Angus reported that a working group had been formed to develop the conference programme, select speakers and organise the event. Dr Maria Kee had agreed to participate at the Conference. The Board approved the work to date and agreed that the event should be scheduled to take place before the first week of May 2005. **Action: Departmental Staff Conference Working Group.**

6(b) Critical Friend

Paul Sweeny thanked members for their nominations for the 'critical friend' service and training would be provided for the six nominees who had volunteered. The service involves providing policy development support to Departments, which are in the lead in policy-making, and provide the type of friendly challenge function that the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit has also introduced. It was agreed that members would identify policy reviews which might benefit from the 'critical friend' service and forward that information to Paul Sweeney as soon as possible. **Action: Directors.**

6(c) Economic Appraisals

The Board noted a paper from David Thomson DFP, Central Finance Group on advice to Departments on economic appraisals and principles which should be followed, namely that:

- i. appraisals should be used as a tool to help good decision making and not as a after the event rationalisation;
- ii. appraisals have to be proportionate, detailed lengthy appraisals are not required in all cases;
- iii. consultants should not be used automatically for appraisals, but should only be retained when absolutely necessary and, when they are, ownership of the project has to remain with the department.
- iv. Departments should avoid an over concentration on the economic appraisal part of the process to the extent that other important aspects are overlooked.

7. Date of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Board was re-scheduled from 14 March to Monday 7 March 2005 in the 4th Floor Conference Room, Castle Buildings

MARK HIGGINS

25 February 2005