

**MINUTES OF THE OFMDFM DEPARTMENTAL BOARD MEETING
ON 16 JANUARY 2006**

PRESENT: Nigel Hamilton (Chair), Mary Bunting,
Frank Cushnahan, Rosalie Flanagan,
George Gray, Stephen Grimason, Jackie Kerr,
Denis McCartney, Chris Stewart and
Paul Sweeney.

IN ATTENDANCE: Mark Higgins (Secretary).

APOLOGIES: Greg McConnell.

Minutes of Last Meeting

1. The minutes of the meetings held on 15 December 2005 were agreed as amended.

Matters Arising

NIAO Management Letter

2. The NIAO Management Letter was dealt with under agenda item 3 (c).

Accounting Officer

3. Mr Hamilton advised the Board that Paul Sweeney has been appointed as Accounting Officer for the Department, effective from 3 January 2006.

STANDING ITEMS

Assembly Issues

4. Rosalie Flanagan provided an update on the Good Government meeting of 11 January 2006 and in particular on the discussion about the Review of Public Administration.

Departmental Board Forward Plan

5. It was agreed that members would send amendments to the plan to the Board secretary who would update and circulate the plan in advance of the next Departmental Board meeting. It was also agreed to include business continuity planning as a standing item at future Board meetings. **Action: Departmental Board Members/ Secretary.**

Finance and Accountability

6. Jackie Kerr tabled a paper on financial outturn information which detailed expenditure by Directorate between administration and resource costs for the period April to November 2005. The paper also detailed the variances underlying the main resource position by Directorate and, as requested at the December 2005 Board meeting, a comparison of final outturn against budget for 2003-04, 2004-05 and the current year to date by Directorate. The meeting discussed in detail the forecasts and variances against planned expenditure, outlined in the paper. The Board noted that only one monitoring round remained in the current financial year and that Finance Division would be consulting regularly with budget holders to achieve planned expenditure targets.
7. Jackie Kerr advised that the outcome of the December Monitoring Round has now been confirmed by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and the Department was successful in obtaining additional provision for the Review of Public Administration team, reduced requirements were

declared and Budget Holders have been advised of their revised budget allocations.

Comprehensive Spending Review

8. The finance paper also reported on the first stage of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) which was being managed by DFP. Initially Departments are being asked to identify and provide proposals for areas for zero based reviews or for programmes / activities that are cross-cutting and inter-departmental in nature. The Board identified potential areas for submission to DFP and it was agreed that Finance Division would take that forward. **Action: Finance Division.**

NIAO Memorandum of Matters Arising

9. The Board noted the Memorandum of matters arising from the audit of the OFMDFM Resource Accounts 2004-05. In total 19 recommendations were made 7 of which are classified as Priority 1 weaknesses which should be addressed immediately. The Board noted that all weaknesses have been accepted and a range of appropriate actions and key accountabilities have been agreed.
10. Mr Cushnahan advised that the Memorandum was fully considered by the Department's Audit Committee at its meeting on 9th January 2006. Mr Hamilton emphasised the key role and responsibilities of the Committee and Departmental Board in addressing the weaknesses identified in the Memorandum. The Board fully endorsed the action being taken by Finance Division, Directors and their budget holders and welcomed the

additional attention being given to the issues, highlighted in the Memorandum, through the planned financial training seminars for relevant senior staff.

Report on Audit Committee Meeting

11. Frank Cushnahan reported that the Audit Committee meeting of 9.1.06 focused on Internal Audit matters, financial and accountability issues and the NIAO Memorandum of matters arising and subsequent action, as discussed earlier at this Board meeting (see paragraphs 9 and 10 above). A minute of the Committee meeting would be circulated to Board members shortly. **Action: Audit Committee Secretary.**

12. The Board noted that Mary Bunting was transferring to the post of Joint Secretary, North/South Ministerial Council with effect from 23 January 2006. The subsequent vacancy created in the Equality Directorate would be filled on a temporary basis and that post holder would attend the Audit Committee meeting until permanent arrangements were finalised. The Board thanked Ms Bunting for her invaluable leadership of the Equality Directorate, her significant input to the work of the Audit Committee and Departmental Board and wished her every success in her new role.

Corporate Risk Register

13. Chris Stewart provided an update on the review of the Corporate Risk Register following initial proposals for amendments by the Audit Committee and changes received

from some Directors. The Board endorsed the proposals received to date including the need to reflect, in the register, business continuity plans, issues arising from the NIAO Memorandum of Matters Arising and faster closing of accounts. It was agreed that members should submit their proposals for amendments to the register to Chris Stewart within two working weeks and the Board would review the subsequent updated register at the February Board meeting.

Action: Directors/ Chris Stewart.

Freedom of Information (FOI) Update

14. Chris Stewart provided an update on FOI cases and the Board discussed exemption issues, the role of the Information Commissioner and a recent case concerning hospitality and media coverage of that subject. Mr Hamilton highlighted the need to ensure that the Guidelines on the Acceptance of Gifts and Hospitality, available in the document library, are adhered to in all circumstances to ensure that standards of integrity and propriety are observed. He also emphasised the requirement for officials to maintain accurate records of all invitations received from outside bodies and individuals.

Workforce Planning

15. Chris Stewart tabled a paper on workforce planning with a view to achieving a consensus on the action to be taken to meet the Department's workforce reduction target and ensure that the Department's workforce matches business need in terms of skills and experience.

16. The Board approved the paper as work in progress and it would continue with a strategic top-down approach to workforce planning by considering the functions of the Department in the context of short and long term aims and objectives. That approach would take account of relevant political developments and major reform programmes such as the Review of Public Administration, e-HR programme and Accounting Services Programme.

17. In the meantime, it was agreed that Directors would provide detailed information as soon as possible to Chris Stewart on those posts initially identified as contributing to the workforce reduction target. **Action: Directors.**

Tour De Table

18. Denis McCartney advised the Board that he has temporarily taking on the role of head of Departmental Solicitors Office, Department of Finance and Personnel and he will continue as Head of Legal Services in the Department. Mr McCartney expressed his gratitude to Caroline Webb who had continued to provide an excellent service to Legal Services customers in Mr McCartney's recent absence. The Board fully endorsed his positive comments in respect of Ms Webb.

19. Mary Bunting thanked the Board for their support to her as head of the Equality Directorate and advised that she looked forward to contributing to the Board's work in her new post as Joint Secretary in the North/South Ministerial Council (see also paragraph 12 above).

20. Rosalie Flanagan referred to the need for the Department to improve performance in answering Parliamentary Questions and for business areas to ensure that everything possible was being done to meet performance targets. She also referred to matters which were receiving higher profiles recently including child protection issues and North South matters pertaining to an all-island economy and investment strategy.
21. George Gray advised the Board that the legislative programme was increasing in size and complexity as a result of the Review of Public Administration and other major areas such as Water Reform and this would substantially increase the workload of his directorate over the next 3 years.
22. Paul Sweeney reported that Evelyn Cummins, the new head of the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive, Brussels, would take up her post on 1 February 2006 and the Strategic Investment Board had appointed Brett Hannam as Chief Operating Officer, with effect from 4 January 2006.

Any Other Business

Register of Interests

23. Chris Stewart advised the Board that the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) has recommended that departments put in place arrangements to create and maintain a Register of Interests for members of the senior civil service (SCS). Personnel will maintain the register and a minute will issue

shortly to relevant staff to complete a Declaration of Interests which confirms that individuals have declared anything which may conflict with their position in the Department.

24. Frank Cushnahan reported that he wished to notify the Board of two recent approaches to him from external organisations. One was in relation to his advice to a private sector company, for their tender in respect of a project associated with the Workplace 2010 programme. The other was his agreement to become a member of a panel of experts on an economic forum body. The Board acknowledged Mr Cushnahan's declaration of interest which would be noted accordingly.

Date of Next Meeting

25. The next meeting would be held on Thursday 9 February 2006 at 10.45 a.m. in the 5th Floor Conference Room E5.27, Castle Buildings.

Mark Higgins

20 January 2006