

**MINUTES OF THE OFMDFM DEPARTMENTAL BOARD MEETINGS
ON 11 and 12 OCTOBER 2005***

- PRESENT:** Nigel Hamilton, Mary Bunting, Frank Cushnahan, Rosalie Flanagan (11.10.05), Stephen Grimason, Jackie Kerr, Greg McConnell Chris Stewart, Peter Smyth and Paul Sweeney.
- IN ATTENDANCE:** Lorna Armstrong, Mark Higgins (Secretary), Neill Jackson (12.10.05) Gerry Mulligan, Colm Shannon and Aubrey Playfair.
- APOLOGIES:** 11.10.05: George Gray and Denis McCartney.
12.10.05: Rosalie Flanagan, George Gray and Denis McCartney.

1. The Board conveyed their best wishes to Peter Smyth who was attending his last Board meeting, before his forthcoming retirement. The Board offered their sincere thanks to Peter for his invaluable contribution as a Board member and in his more recent positions within the Department as Director in the Northern Ireland Bureau, Washington and Joint Secretary in the North/South Ministerial Council.
2. The Board welcomed Chris Stewart to his first Board meeting.
3. *The Board agreed to reconvene at 11.30 a.m. on 12 October to complete items not covered on 11 October 2005.

Item 1 Minutes of Last Meeting

4. The minutes of the meeting held on 20 September 2005 were agreed as amended.

Item 2 Matters Arising

Review of Private Office Resources

5. The review of OFMDFM's Private Office staff resources would be considered as part of the Department's workforce profiling.

STANDING ITEMS

Item 3 (a) Assembly Issues

6. Stephen Grimason gave an update on relevant issues including the implications of the draft Budget 2005 and proposals to hold briefings for Members of the Legislative Assembly on a range of key Government policies. Neill Jackson advised that work was ongoing to organise the latter and he provided an outline of progress on related matters including the legislative programme.

Item 3 (b) Departmental Board Forward Plan

7. The Board agreed amendments to the plan which would be updated and circulated in advance of the next Departmental Board meeting. **Action: Central Management Unit.**

Item 3 (c) Audit Committee Report

8. Jackie Kerr provided a summary of the key points emerging from the first meeting of the re-structured Audit Committee held on 4.10.05 and operating under the Committee's revised terms of reference which the Board had approved.
9. Jackie Kerr explained that the Committee's main focus would be to support the Accounting Officer in monitoring Departmental risk, control, and governance systems and provide advice on the adequacy of coverage of internal and external audit

arrangements to provide the required assurances. The Audit Committee had discussed the need for improved financial information, clear understanding of resource accounts and, in general, the adequacy of financial skills and competence in Audit committees, Departmental Boards, business areas and Non-Departmental Public Bodies.

10. Jackie Kerr advised that she is in contact with DFP to arrange relevant training in financial skills for Audit Committee and Departmental Board members, budget holders and other relevant personnel in directorates and non-departmental public bodies. Finance Division would also be producing interim accounts early in 2006 and would work with divisions to improve systems to meet the requirements of the Accounting Services Programme. The NI Audit Office emphasis at the 4.10.05 committee meeting was in relation to their audit of the 2004/05 Resource Accounts and the requirement for faster closing of accounts, in half the time that is achieved now, by 2008.
11. Frank Cushnahan concurred with Jackie Kerr's synopsis which had provided a full and accurate report of the Committee's discussions. He emphasised that the Gershon principles were relevant and applicable to the work which the Audit Committee were addressing on financial skills and competence. Nigel Hamilton added that it was now a requirement for Departments to employ fully qualified Finance Directors and for audit committees to continually develop their financial competence and skills and disseminate that to departmental staff and bodies which they sponsor.

Item 3 (d) Finance and Accountability

Outturn Report

12. Jackie Kerr tabled a financial outturn paper for the period April to August 2005, by Directorate split between administration and resource costs. The paper summarised the overall outturn position with an outline of the variances underlying the main underspends and overspends to date which the Board noted as a very useful document. The Board approved Jackie Kerr's proposal that Finance Division meet with budget holders to discuss underspends and overspends; move to profiling of budgets for next year and provide the Board with regular reports including expenditure trends. **Action: Finance Division.**

Budget 2005

13. Jackie Kerr provided a verbal update on the Draft Priorities and Budget for 2005-2008 in the context of the Department's proposals to DFP for financial options for reductions and bids. Although there was a slight easement in the options for reductions required by departments some re-profiling would be required by the Board. The Board noted that further financial pressures next year would have to be met within allocated resources.

Prompt Payments

14. Jackie Kerr explained that the Department's prompt payment performance for the financial year to September was improving but was 3% short of the target of 95% of payments being made within the required 30 day deadline. The Board noted that plans

to centralise mobile phone bills should help to improve performance.

Finance Division Resources

15. Jackie Kerr provided an outline of the current Finance Division structure and advised that the introduction of the Accounting Services Programme (ASP), other resourcing pressures and additional responsibilities would have an impact on staffing needs. It was agreed that consideration would be given to transferring the Division's non-financial responsibilities and that a business case for additional resources would be made to the Board. It was also agreed that a presentation on the ASP should be made, in conjunction with DFP, to the Board in the near future. Issues concerning asset management would also be brought to the attention of the Board and the impact of Budget 2005 would be tabled for discussion at the next Board meeting.

Action: Finance Division.

Item 3 (e) Freedom of Information (FOI) Update

16. Chris Stewart provided an update on FOI issues including the number and type of requests received in the Department from 1 January to 30 September 2005 for the information of the Board.

Item 4 (a) New Targeting Social Need (TSN)/ Anti-Poverty Strategy

17. Gerry Mulligan presented a paper outlining a proposed way forward including new, draft, policy proposals for New TSN which had been developed as a result of public consultation. The Board noted the paper which would be subject to Ministerial approval

and which would require further work in the context of the current draft Priorities and Budget document and with appropriate stakeholders.

Item 5 (a) Workforce Planning

18. Chris Stewart tabled the second quarterly report on workforce planning for the 2005-2006 year. The Board noted that the report indicated the need for further work to meet the Department's commitment to reduce staffing levels by 43 full time equivalent posts by March 2008 and in that context the Board also noted the pressures in the Equality Directorate. It was agreed that a further paper on the way forward would be submitted to the Board in the near future. **Action: Chris Stewart.**

Item 5 (b) Managing Attendance

19. Chris Stewart tabled a provisional report on the Department's absence rate for 2004-2005 which was the lowest in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The Board noted the improvement and agreed that Personnel should continue to work with line managers to maintain low levels of absence. It was agreed that the Department's ongoing programme of health awareness and health care, which was generating positive feedback from attendees, should be helpful in this area.

Item 5 (c) Government Review of Advertising

20. Colm Shannon tabled a paper which summarised the key recommendations of the review group, issues to be addressed by Departments and outlined the next steps which included the

publication of a final review document by the end of the year. The group's recommendations included: a more consistent approach by departments to the procurement and management of campaign advertising; a more co-ordinated cross-government approach; the development of a new advertising protocol; and the tendering of new contracts, by April 2006, for an advertising framework and classified advertising. The Board fully supported the review groups report as a major reform project which should be applied across Departments and their agencies and Non-Departmental Public Bodies.

Item 5 (d) Departmental Brief

21. It was agreed that Directors would provide the Board Secretary with additional material for the Brief as soon as possible to enable a final document to be compiled and to initiate the team briefing process within the Department. **Action: Directors.**

Tour De Table

22. Paul Sweeney advised that Evelyn Cummins has been appointed to the post of Head of Office of the Northern Ireland Executive Brussels and will take up her post on a date to be confirmed. He also referred to the Northern Ireland Bureau, Washington which continued to achieve commendation for its work.
23. Neill Jackson provided a synopsis on the Secretary of States programme of visits throughout Northern Ireland. He also advised that the number of Parliamentary Questions (PQs) had recently increased significantly which would require business areas to continue to ensure they adhere strictly to Machinery of

Government guidance on the handling of PQs including the application of standards for accuracy and prompt response times

Any Other Business

Security Inspections

24. Chris Stewart provided a verbal report on a recent security inspection. The Board noted the report and agreed that regular reminders of the Department's security inspection policy should be issued to all staff.

25. It was agreed that a summary of the Departments "clear desk" policy would be included in the October Departmental Brief. The Brief should underline the responsibility of each Head of Branch to ensure that proper procedures are being followed, remind staff of the guidance on handling papers with a protective marking, that regular security checks will be carried out and appropriate disciplinary action may be taken where a security breach is identified. **Action: Departmental Security Officer.**

Equality Scheme

26. Mary Bunting requested that a progress report on implementation of the Department's Equality Scheme is included in the November Board meeting. It was agreed to include that report in the Board's Forward Plan of agenda items. **Action: Board Secretary.**

Date of Next Meeting

27. The next meeting would be held on Tuesday 8 November 2005 in the 5th Floor Conference Room, E5.27, Castle Buildings.

DB 2/11/05

Mark Higgins

28 October 2005