

Reference Number: 02/01/7

**MINUTES OF THE OFMDFM DEPARTMENTAL BOARD MEETING
ON 14 DECEMBER 2006**

- PRESENT:** Nigel Hamilton (Chair), Mary Bunting,
Frank Cushnahan, George Gray, Stephen Grimason,
Deirdre Kenny, and Cynthia Smith.
- IN ATTENDANCE:** Mark Higgins (Secretary) Geoffrey Simpson.
- APOLOGIES:** Rosalie Flanagan, Jackie Kerr and John McMillen.

Belfast Harbour Commissioners

1. The Board noted that Frank Cushnahan was vacating his position as Chair of Belfast Harbour Commissioners at the end of December 2006, following a lengthy period in that role. The Board acknowledged the leadership Mr Cushnahan had provided in that position and his care and diligence in ensuring that the Board was kept up to date with his outside appointments.

MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

2. The minutes of the meeting held on 16 November 2006 were agreed.

MATTERS ARISING

3. Matters arising were covered under the relevant agenda items.

STANDING ITEMS

Assembly/ Restoration Issues

4. Rosalie Flanagan provided an update via an e-mail to the Board Chairman on the current working of the Programme for Government committee and sub-committees.

Forward Plan

5. It was agreed that the Board secretary would seek input to the Plan from Directors for the period April to August 2007. **Action: Mark Higgins.**

Resource Planning

6. Deirdre Kenny advised the Board that the position reported to the November 2006 Board meeting remained substantially unchanged and no new issues had arisen.

Financial Report

7. Deirdre Kenny summarised the papers tabled by Finance Division on financial outturn information to 30th November 2006, Departmental Reserve levels, December monitoring, prompt payment performance and the Department's Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) 2007 Efficiency Delivery Plans.
8. The Board discussed key issues regarding administration cost and resource variance against profiled budgets and the need to continually manage the Department's administration cost

reserve. As Mr McMillen was unavailable for this meeting it was agreed that variances against profiled budget for his business areas would be e-marked for Mr McMillen's attention and an update provided to the January 2007 Board meeting.

9. The Board commended the work being done by business areas in achieving the Department's prompt payment performance for October 2006 of 98% against a target of 95% for payments made within 30 days of invoices being received.

Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) Memorandum of Understanding

10. The Board noted that the NIAO had completed an audit of the Department's 2005 – 06 Resource Accounts and had recently submitted a draft Memorandum of Matters Arising to Finance Division which sought a draft response from the Department to the points raised in the NIAO memorandum. Finance Division tabled a draft corporate response to the meeting, based on inputs from respective business areas, for the Board's consideration and approval.
11. The Board discussed the draft response in detail and agreed that amendments were required in the draft response to reflect the systems and the positive action already in place to address potential weaknesses. Mr Hamilton emphasised the importance the Board places on the NIAO Memorandum and the need to continually review systems and procedures. It was agreed that the Accounting Officer and the Chair of the Audit Committee

would draw up a checklist of action required to address any weaknesses identified in the NIAO Memorandum of Matters Arising (**Action: John McMillen**) including:

- the requirement for sponsoring divisions to ensure they have access to the internal and external audit reports of the Department's sponsored bodies; **Action: Directors**; and
- budget holders to continue to ensure that control procedures for payment authorisations are effective; **Action: Budget Holders**.

Faster Closing

12. Finance Division tabled a draft Project Initiation Document (PID) which contained high level faster closing plans and timetables for the period December 2006 to December 2008 and a detailed accounts preparation timetable for the 2006/07 financial statements. The timetables include key checkpoints for the Board and Audit Committee to review the draft accounts before submission to the NIAO.
13. The Board approved the faster closing PID project plans and timetables noted the role of the Board and Audit Committee in the project management of the faster closing project and the responsibilities of the Board and Audit Committee in the consideration and approval of the year end financial statement.
14. The Board also agreed to the 11 June 2007 deadline for the submission of OFMDFM's accounts to NIAO for audit, subject to the availability of key year end financial data from DFP. It was also agreed that the 2006/07 faster closing deadline is confirmed

with NIAO and DFP and that both bodies are provided with copies of OFMDFM's faster closing plans and timetables. Training and development of relevant staff in sponsored bodies was also discussed and it was agreed that Finance Division would take that forward through the sponsor division. **Action: Finance Division.**

15. The Board noted the concerns regarding the timeframe for the faster closing project which overlaps with the timetable for the implementation of Account NI increasing the risks to the successful delivery of both projects in the context of the Division's resource constraints. It was agreed that the Accounting Officer would raise that resource matter with the Department of Finance and Personnel. **Action: John McMillen.**

Account NI

16. Finance Division tabled a paper on a high level communications strategy and timetable for the implementation of Account NI in OFMDFM for the Board's approval. The Board approved the communications strategy and noted the involvement of the Executive Information Service in facilitating that process.
17. The Board also noted that OFMDFM and DFP are scheduled to be the first departments to transfer to Account NI on 4 June 2006, and as such will play a key role in the implementation of the project. In OFMDFM implementation will be led by Finance Division but specialist knowledge of each business area is also required. It was agreed therefore that Directors should identify key groups and individuals who will be involved in the

implementation within their business areas who would be used as key points of contact during the development of Account NI processes and procedures, and in turn will act as centres of information on Account NI for their own division. The names of individuals would be forwarded to Finula Magowan, Finance Division. **Action: Directors.**

Fraud

18. The Board noted that there were no issues or current cases to report.

Freedom of Information (FOI)

19. Deirdre Kenny provided a verbal update on some current FOI cases. She also advised that in some recent requests which involved the consideration of sensitive information, business areas had been slow to commence action on the request which almost resulted in the statutory deadline being missed on several occasions. She added that as soon as a request is received, it is essential that all information which is, or could be, relevant to the request is identified and collated as quickly as possible. Potential issues should be identified and raised with the Information Management Unit (IMU) at the earliest opportunity.
20. Mrs Kenny explained that FOI requests frequently involve the need for consultation with other departmental business areas and/or, 3rd parties (e.g. other public authorities, organisations or individuals), and consideration of the application of exemptions and the Public Interest Test. In addition, and as highlighted by some recent requests, legal advice may also be necessary. It

was agreed that Directors should remind their staff of the importance of acting immediately on receipt of FOI requests and, in particular, of providing draft responses to the IMU and Legal Services as early in the process as possible. **Action: Directors.**

Managing Attendance

21. Deirdre Kenny reported that absenteeism figures for October 2006 show a slight decrease in the overall level of absence within OFMDFM, down from 4.9% in September to 4.4%.

Operational Plan

22. Deirdre Kenny tabled a draft Operational Plan based on inputs received from Directors. The Board discussed the draft Plan and recommended amendments which would be incorporated in a second draft, with a reduced number of strategic objectives. It was agreed that Mrs Kenny would issue the second draft to Directors to identify high level targets for those strategic objectives to which their business area contributes and to identify, where appropriate, the outputs that will be delivered and the outcomes that will be secured through the achievement of these targets and outputs. A final draft would be submitted to the Minister in early January 2007. **Action: Directors.**

Interim Progress Report On Equality Scheme

23. Cynthia Smith tabled a paper on progress on implementation of the Department's equality scheme and a general update on other equality issues of relevance to Board members. A summary of the key developments in implementing the equality scheme for the 6-month period from April to September 2006 was included in

the paper and a summary of the more recent developments up to the present was also included. The Board noted the progress on implementation of the equality scheme over the past six months.

Equality Rights and Social Needs Division – Workforce Planning

24. Cynthia Smith tabled a paper which detailed resource pressures arising from work associated with the single Equality Bill, the implementation of an anti-poverty strategy and a coordinated approach to equality in the implementation of the Review of Public Administration. As a result of those pressures the Board approved the Equality Directorate postponing, until the end of 2007/08, the suppression of the Grade 7 post originally identified as part of the relevant Division's workforce planning target, to take forward the Division's challenging programme of work.

Departmental Brief

25. The Board approved the new format for the Departmental Brief for issue across the Department. **Action: Deirdre Kenny.**

Tour de Table

26. Deirdre Kenny advised that the half-day Departmental Staff Conference was scheduled for 15 February 2007 and notification would issue to all staff in the next week about the outline programme and venue details. More detailed information would be provided in January 2007, including on-line facilities for staff

to confirm their attendance and choose their preference for a breakout session at the event. The Board recommended that Directors encourage their staff to attend. Deirdre Kenny also reported that a significant number of annual appraisal reports for staff were outstanding and relevant Directors should ensure that they are completed and returned to Personnel as a matter of urgency.

27. Stephen Grimason reported that Executive Information Service (EIS) had received a bronze award from the Northern Ireland Quality Awards, Steps to Excellence process recently. EIS are the first public sector communications organisation in the UK to receive that award.
28. Cynthia Smith reported that the Programme for Government Committee would be debating next week the Government's "Lifetime Opportunities", Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland. The strategy was also debated by the Northern Ireland Grand Committee at their meeting in Belfast on 12 December 2006. Mrs Smith also reported that the Gender Equality Strategy would be launched on 19 December 2006 and she provided an update on the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) that had been laid before Parliament and would be debated in the House of Lords on 9 January 2007.
29. Mary Bunting provided an update on North South matters in respect of the Implementation Bodies.

Date of Next meeting

30. The next monthly meeting of the Board is scheduled for 10.45 a.m. on Thursday, 25 January 2007.