

**MINUTES OF THE SENIOR MANAGEMENT MEETING
ON 19 JANUARY 2006
IN ROOM E4.02 CASTLE BUILDINGS**

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| Present: | Paul Sweeney (Chair) Billy Gamble Neill Jackson Jackie Kerr Denis McCartney Colm Shannon Chris Stewart | Apologies: | Mary Bunting David Finegan Rosalie Flanagan George Gray Stephen Grimason Nigel Hamilton Stewart Johnston Alan Maitland Laurene McAlpine Gerry Mulligan Greg McConnell Linda Wilson |
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In Attendance: Mark Higgins (secretary)

Minutes of Last Meeting/ Matters Arising

1. The minutes of the Senior Management Group (SMG) meeting held on 28 September 2005 were noted and amendments agreed. There were no matters arising from the previous meeting.

OFMDFM Table of Issues

2. Mark Higgins explained that the Table of Issues commissioned by Executive Services for their Departmental Representatives meeting was being discontinued in its present form. The meeting noted that, as the Department's entries in the Table of Issues is used to facilitate discussion at SMG meetings, the proposed change to the table may have an impact on the format of future SMG meetings.

- 3.** An updated Table of Issues, which lists progress on key policy areas for the Department, was provided to the meeting. Members reported on a range of matters, outlined at paragraphs 4 to 18 below.
- 4.** Neill Jackson advised that while the NICS punctuality performance rating in answering Parliamentary Questions (PQs) had improved, OFMDFM's had deteriorated dramatically and quicker turn-around times were required. He added that Machinery of Government (MoG) would continue to provide a challenge function by reporting PQ performance at Divisional level to the Departmental Board. MoG was examining current systems, procedures and the involvement of relevant officials in answering PQs, to identify areas for improvement.
- 5.** Neil Jackson reported that the legislative requirements of the Review of Public Administration over the next 3 years are substantial and would require greater prioritisation of the legislative programme. The meeting discussed issues concerning a lack of suitably skilled staff, in legislative work, which was not unique to the Department but affected all departments.
- 6.** Denis McCartney advised the meeting that he has temporarily taking on the role of head of the Departmental Solicitors Office, Department of Finance and Personnel and he will continue as Head of Legal Services in the Department.

- 7.** Billy Gamble reported on a Freedom of Information case in relation to a Victim's matter and referred to recent media coverage regarding child protection issues which tended to focus on the education sector. The meeting concurred that child protection monitoring systems should take account of all public sector services, including officials involved in monitoring.
- 8.** Chris Stewart advised that workforce planning had been discussed at the 16 January 2006 Departmental Board meeting. The Board had agreed a consensus on the action to be taken to meet the Department's workforce reduction target. Mr Stewart advised that the Board would continue with a strategic top-down approach to workforce planning to meet its commitments to the workforce reduction target and ensure that the Department's workforce matches business need in terms of skills and experience.
- 9.** Colm Shannon provided an update on the latest matters in relation to the Government's Review of Advertising including the need to identify annual advertising budgets. A coherent service-wide PR programme for Ministers on key events up to Easter 2006 was being developed.
- 10.** Jackie Kerr updated the meeting on a range of financial matters including the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) which was being managed by DFP. CSR required Departments 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 had identified potential areas

for submission to DFP and Finance Division will take that forward.

- 11.** Jackie Kerr also updated the meeting on faster closing, which was being managed by DFP, to achieve earlier closure for the 2005-06 financial year. She reported that the Departmental Board and Audit Committee are taking a pro-active role and that budget holders also had an active part to play in helping to achieve faster closing.
- 12.** Jackie Kerr also provided an update on the financial training programme, including further seminars on lessons learned and plans for a wider training programme on corporate governance.
- 13.** Mrs Kerr also referred to the NIAO Memorandum of Matters Arising from the audit of the OFMDFM Resource Accounts 2004-05. She advised that a total 19 recommendations were made, 7 of which are classified as Priority 1 weaknesses, that all weaknesses have been accepted and a range of appropriate actions and key accountabilities have been approved by the Departmental Board.
- 14.** Mrs Kerr reported that the outcome of the December Monitoring Round has now been confirmed by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP); reduced requirements were declared and Budget Holders have been advised of their revised budget allocations.
- 15.** Paul Sweeney advised the meeting that he has been appointed

as Accounting Officer for the Department, effective from 3 January 2006. He also 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.

16. In regard to recent media coverage on hospitality, Mr Sweeney Reported that this issue was discussed recently at Permanent Secretary Group and the Departmental Board. He advised that the Board had emphasised 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.
17. Mr Sweeney added that the hospitality guidelines recommended the maintenance of records for all invitations from external organisations in respect of hospitality. He advised that senior staff should determine the business critical reasons, in all cases, when considering such requests and that heads of divisions should disseminate the above points to appropriate staff. Chris Stewart advised that the IT Unit are exploring suitable computer based applications that would record hospitality requests and so assist business areas to produce relevant information more efficiently.

Senior Management Group Attendance

18. The meeting noted a low attendance rate and a lack of agenda items at this and previous SMG meetings. The meeting discussed the way forward in terms of examining the role, operation and format of meetings and possible methods for generating agenda items and increasing attendance figures. A number of options

and ideas were discussed and it was agreed that Paul Sweeney would submit these to the next Departmental Board meeting in February 2006 for the Board to discuss and agree a way forward.

Action: Paul Sweeney.

Date of next meeting

20. The next meeting of the senior management group is scheduled for Thursday 16 March 2006, commencing at 10.45 a.m. in the Conference Room E4.02 Castle Buildings.

MARK HIGGINS

24.1.06