

**MINUTES OF THE OFMDFM DEPARTMENTAL BOARD MEETING
ON 9 FEBRUARY 2006**

- PRESENT:** Nigel Hamilton (Chair), Mary Bunting,
Frank Cushnahan, Rosalie Flanagan,
Billy Gamble, George Gray, Stephen Grimason,
Jackie Kerr, Denis McCartney, Greg McConnell
Paul Sweeney.
- IN ATTENDANCE:** Mark Higgins (Secretary), Lorna Armstrong.
- APOLOGIES:** Chris Stewart.

The Board welcomed Billy Gamble to his first meeting as acting head of the Equality Directorate.

Minutes of Last Meeting

1. The minutes of the meetings held on 16 January 2006 were agreed as amended.

Matters Arising

Corporate Risk Register

2. The register was dealt with under agenda item 5 (c).

STANDING ITEMS

Assembly Issues

3. Rosalie Flanagan provided an update on meetings between the Secretary of State, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs and local political parties on 6 February. Further meetings with the Parties are scheduled to take place later in February 2006. She also briefed colleagues on the recent speeches by the Secretary of

State and on a range of developments on north/south co-operation.

Departmental Board Forward Plan

4. The Board approved the updates to the plan which would be circulated with the request for agenda items for the March 2006 Departmental Board meeting.

Finance and Accountability

5. Jackie Kerr tabled a paper on financial outturn information which detailed expenditure by Directorate between administration and resource costs for the period April to December 2005. The paper also detailed the variances underlying the main resource position by Directorate and summarised the administration cost position by Directorate.
6. Mrs Kerr also tabled additional preliminary financial information to January 2006 including detailed profiles of resource spend over the final three months of the financial year, for key business areas. Directors in those areas provided the Board with an outline of planned expenditure to the financial year end.
7. Mrs Kerr also provided further detail on the administration cost position and forecasts of expenditure for the end of the financial year. She outlined the necessary action required in terms of: the surrender of reduced requirements in February; monitoring against profiled budgets; management of spend and budget in-year; the critical assessment of budgetary requirements for 2006-07 and improvements to project and budget management.

8. The Board thanked Mrs Kerr and her staff for the professionally produced financial reports and analysis which it discussed in detail. Mr Hamilton emphasised the need to achieve value for money and to avoid underspend or overspend in all planned expenditure. It was agreed that it would also be useful to provide future Board meetings with a summary of spend against budget for the current and previous two years for comparison purposes.
9. Jackie Kerr advised that she had some concerns about administrative delays in receiving relevant financial information from the Northern Ireland Bureau, Washington, related to their expenditure. Mr Sweeney advised that he had discussed and was pursuing the matter with head of the Bureau with the aim of improving the administrative arrangements currently in place with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.
10. Jackie Kerr also highlighted those business areas that had a significant accrual history and the Board discussed the importance of key performance indicators in the context of accruals, particularly for high spending areas, including specific NDPBs.
11. Jackie Kerr outlined the revised budgetary arrangements for 2006-07 and she reported that, from April 2006, the Board would be provided with profiled budget reports on a monthly

basis, and resource-based management accounts on a quarterly basis.

Faster Closing

12. Jackie Kerr also tabled a paper on the Faster Closing project and a plan and timetable for the preparation of the 2005-06 departmental accounts for the approval of the Board. The faster closing plans and timetables include checkpoints for the Board and Audit Committee to review the draft accounts before submission to the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO). The NIAO has recommended that the Department's accounts should be submitted for audit by 26 June 2006.
13. The Board approved the Faster Closing project plans and timetables and agreed to the 25 June 2006 deadline for the submission of the 2005/06 accounts to the NIAO, subject to the availability of key year-end financial data. The Board also noted its role, and that of the Audit Committee, in the management of the project and their approval of the year end financial statements. Mrs Kerr advised that a series of workshops on faster closing had been organised for budget holders and senior management in the Department's Non-Departmental Public Bodies.
14. Mr Cushnahan praised the faster closing report prepared by Mrs Kerr and referred to the potential substantial work in ensuring that all key stakeholders were involved and the need to recognise the additional pressures on Finance Division.

15. Mr Hamilton advised that the availability of timely financial information was essential for all aspects of financial management and the achievement of faster closing deadlines and timetables. The Board therefore agreed to re-schedule future Board meetings to a later time in the month to accommodate the shorter deadlines and the issue of a preliminary analysis outturn report to Board members each month. **Action: Finance Division/ Board Secretary.**

NIAO Memorandum of Matters Arising

16. Jackie Kerr tabled a schedule of actions taken to date and proposed actions to address the NIAO recommendations arising from the memorandum of matters arising from the audit of the department's financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2005. The Board noted and endorsed the schedule as a useful and professional document which should be given a high profile in the Department. It was agreed that the document should be disseminated to appropriate staff by the Accounting Officer. **Action: Finance Division.**

Freedom of Information (FOI) Update

17. Paul Sweeney provided an update on FOI cases for the period 1 January 2005 to 27 January 2006, which showed that the Department was continuing to perform well in responding to requests within Cabinet Office guidelines. The average time to process requests continued to be 10 days.

Managing Attendance

18. Paul Sweeney tabled a paper on the Department's absenteeism statistics for October, November and December 2005 which had been compiled by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. Mr Cushnahan commended the absenteeism reports as useful management information of high quality and detail which demonstrated that levels of absence in OFMDFM remained the lowest in the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

OFMDFM Web Publishing Policy

19. Stephen Grimason tabled a paper on corporate web publishing policy which meets the new standards endorsed by the NICS e-Government Board for government websites in relation to accessibility, style, metadata and content management. Lorna Armstrong provided a verbal update on progress to date and explained that the main OFMDFM site has been redesigned and developed to meet these standards and went live in August 2005.
20. Mrs Armstrong explained that there was some delay in training of users which would be addressed by a commitment from the new Training Shared Service Centre to re-commence the training from April 2006. The Departmental Board noted the progress to date on implementing the corporate web standards and the delay in relation to training and approved the web publishing policy for implementation by all branches within the Department.

Future of Senior Management Group

21. Paul Sweeney explained that at the January 2006 SMG meeting those present reflected on the dwindling number of attendees at

SMG, which gave rise to a wider discussion on the relevancy and future of that group.

22. Paul Sweeney tabled a paper which summarised the key points arising from the SMG discussion which included proposals for improving the format of meetings and which outlined the benefits of SMG. The Board noted the proposals and agreed that a paper would issue from Nigel Hamilton to SMG members that would outline the proposals for improvement, confirm its valued role and highlight the importance attached to the full attendance of members.

Corporate Risk Register

23. Paul Sweeney explained that Directors have provided proposed changes to the register, including substantial changes to Risk 8 and a new risk nine, entitled, "Ineffective document retention and retrieval". The Board discussed and agreed the changes which would be incorporated into an updated register.
24. The Board recommended that directorates, including those with sponsoring responsibilities for Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) should revise their business risks registers as a result of the revised Corporate Risk Register and to reflect their responsibilities as risk owners. **Action: Directors.**

Tour De Table

25. Nigel Hamilton advised that new guidance was being developed in respect of hospitality to ensure consistency across the Northern Ireland Civil Service and he emphasised the need to

maintain accurate and up-to-date records of all requests and for effective monitoring systems to be in place. He advised that monitoring systems were operating and improved, through the development of computer based systems, for requests to the offices of the Head of the Civil Service and Permanent Secretaries.

26. Jackie Kerr reported that a recent House of Commons Public Accounts Committee and Audit Office report criticised the Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU) for the way in which it oversaw spending by the Emerging Business Trust. Mrs Kerr advised that David Thomson, DFP Treasury Officer of Accounts had issued advice on lessons to learn, particularly in terms of conflict of interests, from that case which should be communicated to all relevant business areas.
27. Mrs Kerr advised that she was currently considering options for a suitable training course on Corporate Governance for senior staff in the Department and senior representatives from the Department's Non-Departmental Public Bodies.
28. Billy Gamble reported that the Minister had indicated that he wished to move forward in respect of further development of the Single Equality Bill.

Date of Next Meeting

29. The next meeting would be held on Wednesday 22 March 2006 at 10.45 a.m. in the 5th Floor Conference Room E5.27, Castle Buildings. As outlined at paragraph 15 above members would be

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notified of changes to the dates of future Board meetings to accommodate faster closing deadlines and the production of additional financial management information.

Mark Higgins

15 February 2006