

**MINUTES OF PERMANENT SECRETARY GROUP MEETING
HELD ON FRIDAY 20 MARCH 2009, IN THE GLASSHOUSE,
STORMONT CASTLE AT 8.45 AM**

Present: Bruce Robinson - Chair
Sean Donaghy
David Ferguson
Will Haire
Aideen McGinley
Malcolm McKibbin
Leo O'Reilly
Stephen Peover
Paul Priestly
Stephen Quinn
Paul Sweeney

In attendance: Oswyn Paulin
Neill Jackson
John McMillen
David Orr
Tom Kennedy
Stephen Grimason
Colm Shannon
Pauline Boyle - Secretary

1. **Apologies:** Andrew McCormick
Alan Shannon
Rosalie Flanagan

2. **Minutes of the meeting held on 13 March 2009**

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 March have been circulated. Any comments/amendments to Pauline.

3. **Matters Arising**

Sir Gus O'Donnell

Sir Gus O'Donnell wrote to Bruce Robinson to thank all those involved in the arrangements for his visit to Northern Ireland on 12-13 March. Bruce Robinson said he would copy his letter to Permanent Secretaries.

[Action: Secretary]

Assembly Business

Rosalie Flanagan has written to Departments on arrangements for handling No Day Named Motions in the Assembly.

Election Guidance

Bruce Robinson said advice on Election Guidance had been received from the Cabinet Office. Stephen Quinn said it would be helpful to know when purdah would begin. This will be on the agenda for next week's PSG meeting.

4. **Assembly & Executive Update**

Neill Jackson advised that the next meeting of the Executive was scheduled for 26 March.

Assembly

Neill said a debate would be held on Monday 23 March on a Standing Order introducing written Ministerial Statements to the Assembly. In the week commencing 28 March a debate would be held on the report of the Committee on Procedures Inquiry into Assembly Questions.

5. **NIDirect**

Tom Kennedy said Phase 1 of NIDirect programme started in January 2008 and was subject to the PSA 20 target to improve Public Services and Access to Government Information. A contract was awarded in July 2008 to the Steria/Echo partnership to assist in the delivery of the contact centres. A 101 number and service was procured and implemented. Phase 1 is a pathfinder to test the NIDirect approach and involved Planning Service, DARD, General Registry and Land & Property Services – the anchor tenants. If queries could be answered at first point of contact they were dealt with then, if not the query was passed to an expert if available or a case created for callback, in this way no request was lost. This service went live at the end of October 2008. Tom thanked the anchor tenants for their support, patience and engagement in NIDirect.

The Flooding incident line went live at end of December 2008 and was launched on 30 January 2009. Lessons learned from the launch were picked up and worked through with the three agencies with flooding responsibility – regular testing, refinement and ongoing training are necessary to keep the service ready.

NIDirect on-line is an important part of the overall NIDirect service by getting and maintaining the right information on the web. If the information is on the web the call centre staff can also use it but for future reference can also refer the member of the public to the appropriate part of the web for the information requested and thereby reduce the number of phone calls eventually.

The number of call centres has been rationalised from 8 to 2 contact centres – one in the Causeway Exchange in Belfast and the other in Orchard House in Londonderry.

Tom said Phase 1 delivery was very challenging and had very tight targets but when the web site goes live the entire service will move into operational and continuous improvement mode.

NIDirect Phase 2 will consider the long-term vision and must add value by improving the quality of the service and information provided to the public. Things to be addressed in scoping Phase 2 include choice, accessibility, partnerships and skills. Lessons learned from Phase 1 need to feed into the business cases. He outlined the range of options for Phase 2 from basic information provision across the business to keeper transactional services for a more limited number of business areas.

In line with the guidance, a relevant strategic outline business case for Phase 2 needs to be developed and approved followed by a more detailed outline business case. Consideration needs to be given to the range of services, the depth of the service, and length of time in which this can be achieved. It needs to be recognised that funding for Phase 2 has not been secured. PWC are engaged at present to help develop the business case as they have experience of this type of change being done elsewhere.

Tom emphasised that NIDirect Phase 2 is not something that can be done to departments rather they need to embrace the change and work in partnership to deliver a service and therefore need to confirm their appetite for such change.

Colm Shannon said NIDirect on-line is on target for a soft launch on 31 March. The Home page is virtually finished and includes Motoring, Money and Tax Benefits as well as a range of other themes. The process involves taking the Directgov content and localising this for NI. This is 90% complete. The other 10% is currently being dealt with and includes issues such as debt management and mortgage arrears. Colm wants CAB to look locally at this before putting on the site. Colm recognises the work so far has been challenging across Departments and passed on thanks for this. A quality process is being undertaken on content to include plain English, proof reading, tweaking and improving style. Plain English courses would be set up and he is letting people view the web internally.

The NIDirect team in partnership with the Consumer Council will give presentations to representative groups and organisations on Monday and Tuesday evening 23 & 24 March and their ideas will be taken on board while moving forward and developing the site.

It is planned to launch the site formally in June 2009.

Departments need to start thinking on future development as this is only the beginning. Consideration needs to be given to the provision of new content as well as the consolidation of existing content and websites. Approximately 160 transactions would be on the site at 31 March ie MOT testing. There is a real opportunity for departments to use NIDirect as a platform for new transactions. NIDirect is working with the SSA to examine how some elements of the My DWP project can be incorporated within the site, including an on-line benefits calculator.

The internet is now the key communications channel and departments need to ensure that they integrate the internet within their communications activities and resource themselves to do this.

David Orr said this is not just about a single number 101 telephone service, rather a successful NIDirect approach requires business transformation in Departments - it's important to ensure that information stays up to date and is transferred onto the web as soon as possible. He emphasised that there is no money to fund NIDirect but the Executive agreed it would come from monitoring rounds.

Malcolm McKibbin stressed that this is a major reform project. The strategic business case will give potential costs and benefits but there is no specific allocation to fund the project, if it is decided to proceed with a detailed business case or indeed, the project itself. Affordability will clearly be a significant issue. Permanent Secretaries should give thought to the potential impact on their resources. Branches in each Department will require people to write scripts to help handlers. There would be a significant staff resource commitment and decisions need to be made with this in mind.

Bruce Robinson said the challenge is how we communicate Phase 2 of this project. The timetable needs to detail how we communicate with Ministers and how to communicate with Departmental Ministers on advantages of NIDirect. Consideration needs to be given on how we communicate with our own staff. OFMDFM staff absorbed the extra work for on-line pages so far. Bruce said Departments need to take responsibility for this instead of looking to the Centre. Permanent Secretaries need to come to terms in their own minds how each Department accepts the challenge. Phase 2 of telephony will raise issues and we can't move to Phase 2 unless the challenges are sorted.

David Orr said the discussion today was good. He has had strong support from Departments and particularly welcomed Malcolm McKibbin's leadership of the Sponsor Group and Stephen Peover's leadership on the PSG Sub-Group. David would like to come back to PSG when the strategic outline business case has been drawn up. David said that some people have seen the call centres but if others wish to see he or Tom would be willing to arrange.

Bruce Robinson said it would be helpful if Colm Shannon could suggest a communication line which could be shared in our Departments re the launch on 31 March. PSG agreed this would be helpful.

[Action: Colm Shannon]

6. **Tour de Table**

Audit Results

Stephen Quinn updated on audit results of an NI Audit Office Report on Invest NI.

Stephen Quinn reported that he would consult with HOCS before replying to a letter received from the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

Deloitte

Stephen Peover said he received a Deloitte report and some other Permanent Secretaries had also received which quoted salaries of NI Permanent Secretaries. It was agreed to check whether Deloitte had asked for salary bands prior to publishing.

[Action: Leo O'Reilly]

Further Education Pay

Aideen McGinley said DEL had reached a resolution on the Further Education Sector pay dispute.

Essential Skills

Aideen McGinley wrote to Departments re the Essential Skills Conference on 25 March at the Ramada Hotel to ask Perm Secs to ensure that all Departments are represented at HR Director level.

Washington

Bruce Robinson reported on his visit to Washington from 15-19 March 2009.

Emerald Fund

Stephen Quinn asked whether the Emerald Fund had distributed money to economic development. John McMillen would check the latest position and report back.

[Action: John McMillen]

Devolution of Policing & Justice

Bruce Robinson said he attended a meeting in London on Thursday 19 March with officials from No 10 and NIO on Devolution of Policing & Justice and a lot of work needed to be done. DFP would meet with Treasury week commencing 30 March for discussions. It would be important to engage with Ministers on this now.

**PAULINE BOYLE
23 March 2009**