**DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT & RURAL AFFAIRS**

**Departmental Board Meeting**

**Meeting of Wednesday 19 May 2021, via Webex**

**MINUTES**

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| **Members:** | Robert Huey(Chair)  Brian Doherty (Chair)  Norman Fulton  Tracey Teague  Sean McGrade  David Reid  Paula Bratton  Sharon McCue  Bernie Stuart  David Esler | Deputy Secretary, Veterinary Service Animal Health Group  Deputy Secretary, Central Services & Contingency Planning Group  Deputy Secretary, Food & Farming Group  Deputy Secretary Environment Marine and Fisheries Group and Chief Executive NIEA  Director of Corporate Services (Acting)  Director of Finance  Strategic Business Partner, NICS HR  Non-Executive Member (NEM)  Non-Executive Member (NEM)  NI Boardroom Apprentice |
| **Apologies:** | Denis McMahon Fiona McCandless | Permanent Secretary  Deputy Secretary, Rural Affairs, Forest Service & Estate Transformation Group |
| **In Attendance:** | Kathryn Clarke  John Joe O’Boyle | Permanent Secretary’s Office  Chief Executive of the Forest Service |
| **Secretariat** | Louise Mackey | Central Management Branch |

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| **Item** | **Description** | **Action** |
| **1** | **Welcome** |  |
|  | Robert welcomed everyone to the meeting. |  |
| **1(i)** | **Declaration of Interest** |  |
|  | Nothing was declared. |  |
| **1(ii)** | **Opening Remarks** |  |
|  | Robert gave an update from his Group then invited the other Grade 3s to give an update for their Groups.  VSAHG   * They are continuing to implement the NI protocols and checks. * There are currently meetings with Defra and the EU Commission. * There is a halt on building permanent border facilities. * The EU Commission is due to do an Audit during June.   FFG   * The Future Agricultural Policy is prominent at the moment. * There are currently workshops taking place across many work streams. * The Policy now links with the Green Growth Strategy. * A Food Framework is currently with the Executive.   EMFG & NIEA   * The Private Member’s Climate Change Bill passed the 2nd stage recently. * The DAERA Climate Change Bill is imminent. * The Green Growth Strategic Framework has been agreed by the Minister. * The Environment Bill is making its passage through Parliament. * There are also the Environment Strategy, Ammonia Strategy and the Deposit and Return Scheme. * There is an ongoing issue at a landfill site at Mullaghglass. * There was a recent fish kill incident.   RAFSET   * Work is being done to mark the Centenary and the Queen’s Commonwealth Canopy. * There are still issues around plant movement due to the NIP. |  |
| **2** | |  | | --- | | **HR Update and Management Information** | |  |
|  | Robert invited Paula to give her presentation. Paula spoke to the paper and updated the Board on 3 keys areas; Resourcing, Temporary Promotions and Sick Absence Compliance.  **Resourcing**  The number of staff in post has increased by 2.9% during the period from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 21. Paula reflected that this increase was during a period of suspension of all nonessential recruitment activity, an exercise to review priority vacancies across the NICS, which resulted in DAERA’s vacancy position increasing significantly and a suspension on transfers across Departments. Paula explained how NICSHR has sought to address both the staffing shortfalls and workforce profile of the NICS through large scale external recruitment at AO, SO, DP and the recently advertised EO1 and EO2 competitions. There are also a significant number of competitions ongoing for non-general service grades.  Paula explained that NICS HR are planning student placements and that Departments had been provided with detail on how to potentially source secondments from the GB Civil Service Fast Stream Scheme. To speed up the process of filling posts, she requested that Business Areas are prompt in their replies to requests for information e.g. job specifications or panel member availability.  A detailed discussion followed this part of Paula’s presentation.  The key points were:-   * There is an issue around the capabilities of staff and there is a need for training in areas like drafting skills, financial management, delivering schemes and understanding the EU and legislation. * It was agreed that the Department now has a greater need for staff due to BREXIT/NIP and new Divisions being formed. * There is a need to look at the headcount in light of new pressures. * Responses to the exit questionnaires need to be reviewed. * Pools and alternative working patterns need to be considered when there is a vacancy to be filled. * A comprehensive consideration of future resource requirements is needed. * The competency based interview system needs re-evaluated (this is underway).   Some private sector ways of recruiting were discussed, including conversion of agency staff to permanent employees. The importance of adhering to the requirements of the Civil Service Commissioners’ Recruitment Code in appointment of persons to the NICS was discussed.  **Temporary Promotions**  There is a high number of temporary promotions in the Department, currently 11.9% of the workforce and an increase of 63% over the last 12 months. These cover short term and long term vacancies. A number of them are due to end naturally in due course. Paula referred to the review commissioned by the Resourcing and People Committee; this, coupled with ongoing recruitment exercises, should reduce the number.  **Sick Absences**  Sick absence rates remain lower than 2019/20 and there is an overall reduction in NICS of 24%. The figure in DAERA is 19.5% reduction. Employee Relations and NI Statistics and Research Agency will carry out an analysis on this. Whilst sick absence remains lower than previous years, the low levels of sick absence compliance also remains.  In April, guidance was re-issued to all staff regarding the processes involved in managing sick absences and tools available to assist. Communications also issued to SCS to ensure there is a managing attendance objective in Personal Performance Agreements (PPAs) and that compliance is monitored and discussed in staff meetings. Paula advised that one of the key objectives in the 2021/22 Year 4 People Strategy Implementation Plan is the continued roll out of the employee relations project to build capability of the line manager role in the NICS, emphasising the importance of ensuring these fundamental line manager actions were followed before further authority for people management issues are rolled out to line managers.  **Learning and Development**  It was noted that some training courses that were classroom based have not taken place in the last year and that others did take place on-line. Paula will check this is the reason for no uptake of some courses  There was a discussion around the compliance data on mandatory training courses and that agency staff who are no longer employed but have not been removed as a registered user on the Links system may still be included on the report.  It was also noted that not all mandatory courses have been completed by staff and that this should be an objective in staff PPAs. Paula is to develop wording for the objective with Lorrayne Simmons and Gerry McPeake and forward to Brian for consideration. Paula is also to draw up a list of all mandatory courses. | **Paula Bratton**  **Paula Bratton**  **Paula Bratton** |
| **Items for Agreement** | | |
| **3** | **Finance Update** |  |
|  | David Reid spoke to the paper, covering Provisional Outturn and June Monitoring. He highlighted that the final Provisional Outturn for Resource DEL budget (excluding Protocol) was just under 100% and that Capital was 99.8%.  June Monitoring will be presented to the Committee in 2 weeks. There will be no overall underspend or additional bids brought to them.  The Board requested that thanks is to be passed on to Finance Division for their work on the Provisional Outturn.  Members noted the paper. | **David Reid** |
| **4** | **Forest Service Business Plan** |  |
|  | John Joe talked to the paper. He pointed out that a lot of the Forest Service work lasts for more than one year and that their Business Plan shows this continuity. Two main areas on the Plan this year are Forests for the Future and the Climate Change Agenda. Plant Health is also an issue and needs legislation change and controls.  Forest Service have issues around vacancies and recruitment and they are currently working with NICS HR on a recruitment plan. Some grades may only have a pool of candidates from GB or RoI. Forest Service will have to temporarily promote staff into posts while external recruitment takes place.  It was suggested that:-   * when EU expenditure ends should be written into the Plan * some of the sub-targets could be re-named as milestones * the commitment to Health and Safety and staff training in the use of equipment should be mentioned * the requirement for the jigsaw graphic should be considered, and * planting targets may not be achievable   John Joe to review the plan in light of these comments.  It was also raised that the land that will not be planted on should be managed in an exemplar way and that some consideration should be given to where future funding may be coming from.  Tracey would like a discussion with Forest Service around a Land Use paper EMFG are issuing.  The Plan was approved subject to issues being considered. | **John Joe O’Boyle / Fiona McCandless** |
| **5** | **NI Fishery Harbour Authority Business Plan** |  |
|  | Brian spoke to the paper provided.  It was suggested by Board members that:-   * when EU funding ends should be written into the plan * some of the targets are too low level and could be removed.   Feedback will be passed on and the Board approved the Plan subject to those issues being considered. |  |
| **6** | **2020/21 Casework Committee Review of Cases** |  |
|  | Brian spoke to the paper provided.  He explained this is the first time this has been brought to the Board and that the Casework Committee is now a sub-committee of the Finance Committee.  Bernie said the Corporate Governance Framework section needs updated. Brian to review this.  It was asked if the Committee has eased the passage of cases through to DoF and it was confirmed that it has and that DoF take assurance from the fact that cases have gone through the Committee first.  Brian highlighted the fact that staff should be aware, when writing Business Cases, that the Committee is not in a position to consider project/programme staffing requirements. Brian also advised of the importance of the Departmental Board receiving periodic updates on business cases that have been considered and approved by the Committee.  Members noted the paper. | **Brian Doherty** |
| **Items for Discussion** | | |
| **7** | **Veterinary Service Animal Health Group Risk Register** |  |
|  | Robert spoke to the paper provided.  He explained that the Register shows risks that have been elevated from Divisional level to Group level.  There are staffing risks due to BREXIT/NIP.  Bernie queried whether Business Plan targets can be met when there were a lot of amber and red risks but Brian explained that the risks do not mean that the target can’t be met. Bernie suggested some analysis might be beneficial to see how targets are met with high risks.  Members were reminded that all Risk Registers were to be presented to the Board this year as a result of last year’s Board Effectiveness Review.  The issue of the process for consideration of risk registers and the respective roles of the Board and ARAC will be referred to ARAC for consideration with a report back to the Board following that consideration. The consideration by ARAC will be assisted by the Department’s risk practitioners Briege Lafferty and Hugh Quinn.  Robert left the meeting at 14.40 and Brian took over as Chair. | **Sharon McCue** |
| **8** | **Corporate Risk Register and DAERA Business Plan 2020/21 end year position** |  |
|  | Brian spoke to the paper provided.  **Business Plan**  There was 1 target not achieved – Green Growth Strategy.  It was recognised that there were particular challenges why this target was not achieved and a new implementation timeline has now been agreed with the Minister.  Amber targets are in respect of:   * Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland * Eradication of Bovine TB * Regulatory Checks   94% of targets have been met or partially met.  Briege Lafferty has issued the Five Year Plan to members for comments.  **Risk Register**  There are 10 risks – 9 amber and 1 red.  The red is the Green Growth Strategy, which at the request of Tracey Teague will be removed. The Board was content with this proposal.  Bernie suggested that some analysis could now be done in relation to the link between the risks and the targets.  Members noted the paper. |  |
| **Closing Items** | | |
| **9(a)** | **Minutes of the Previous Meeting** |  |
|  | Agreed |  |
| **9(b)** | **Matters Arising from Previous Board Meeting** |  |
|  | Action Points 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 from February are complete**.**  Outstanding Action Points are:  2) Health and Safety Update - Review the H&S report and associated target completion markings. Lorrayne Simmons is to discuss this with Bernie Stuart. |  |
| **9(c)** | **Forward Look Agenda – June 21** |  |
|  | Finance won’t need a long slot. Finance to be swapped with the NIEA Business Plan.  Ideally Business Plans should be issued well in advance of the meetings.  Sean to check on the LMC Plan | **Sean McGrade** |
| **10** | **Any other Business** |  |
|  | Brian advised the Board that Tracey Teague was successful in a recent external competition to fill the vacancy in EMFG. Tracey took up post on 4 May.  Brian also informed members that the Department will again be taking part in the Boardroom Apprentice for the 21/22 intake. |  |
|  | **Close** |  |
|  | The meeting ended at 3pm |  |
|  | **Next Meeting: 23 June 2021, at 10.00am via Webex** | |