

Meeting of Wednesday 15 December 2021, via Webex

MINUTES

Members:	Anthony Harbinson (Chair) Fiona McCandless Robert Huey Norman Fulton Brian Doherty Paul Donnelly Roger Downey Sharon McFlynn Paula Bratton Sharon McCue Bernie Stuart Gillian Stirling	Permanent Secretary Deputy Secretary, Rural Affairs, Forest Service, Estate Transformation, Brexit Operational Readiness and Food Security Group Deputy Secretary, Veterinary Service Animal Health Group Deputy Secretary, Food & Farming Group Deputy Secretary, Central Services & Contingency Planning Group Chief Executive, NIEA Director of Finance Director of Corporate Services Strategic Business Partner, NICS HR Non-Executive Member (NEM) Non-Executive Member (NEM) NI Boardroom Apprentice
Apologies:	Tracey Teague	Deputy Secretary Environment Marine and Fisheries Group
In Attendance:	Ash Davidson Dave Foster	Office of the Permanent Secretary Director of Regulatory & Natural Resources Policy, EMFG
Secretariat	Louise Mackey	Central Management Branch

Item	Description	Action
1	Welcome	
	Anthony welcomed everyone to the meeting. He advised colleagues that the Permanent Secretaries are meeting daily with regards to Covid-19 and the new variant – Omicron. He said that HOCS will be writing to staff shortly about the current ‘work from home’ message. He said that there	

	is a possibility of surge teams being put together and this may bring a need to pause some work.	
1(i)	Declaration of Interest	
	No interests relating to the agenda were declared.	
2 (a)	Minutes of Previous Board Meeting	
	Members agreed the minutes from November's meeting.	
2 (b)	Matters Arising from Previous Board Meeting	
	<p>Action Points 1-4 from November's meeting are complete.</p> <p>Action Point 1 from September's meeting is complete.</p> <p>Outstanding action points from September:</p> <p>After the Minister has responded on the TB Policy bring the outcome to DB in October or November. Minister has yet to respond – possible item in January 22 meeting.</p>	Robert Huey
Items for Agreement		
3	HR Update	
	<p>Paula spoke to the paper and gave an update on the staff in post, agency worker, temporary promotion and vacancy position.</p> <p>She explained that NICS HR are going to be looking at vacancies that have been withdrawn to ascertain whether there are any trends/hot spot areas that would warrant further investigation. She advised that the allocations from the last round of DP assessment centres was completed in line with DAERA agreed priorities. Line managers would be notified shortly of any allocation to their vacancy. Allocations for the SO grade are due to commence early in the new year. The EOII/I competitions are at formal offer stage and a new batch from the AO competition should be progressed soon. There are 25 non-general service competitions for DAERA currently ongoing.</p> <p>Paula advised members that the Employee Relations Sick Absence Stage 2 was launched on 29 November. She highlighted that the paper provided for today's meeting shows the number of DAERA cases currently with OHS. However OHS have advised that they have recently had to re-prioritise their resources as a result of the Avian influenza outbreak. This had led to the cancellation and rescheduling of business as usual appointments.</p>	

	<p>Relating to the temporary variation to the current Recruitment Agency Workers contract, allowing departments to draw temporary workers to fill general service vacancies up to Grade 6 for a fixed period up until 30 June 2022, Bernie asked if there were plans to fill these posts with experienced people. Brian said that they are planning to fill priority lower grade posts with experience and backfill through agencies. He said agency workers at the higher grades are very rare.</p> <p>Brian suggested to colleagues that the staff filling posts through temporary promotions should be rotated, giving staff equal opportunities. Sharon McCue highlighted the need to be aware of the affordability of the staffing resources.</p> <p>Anthony said that he plans to issue a note to staff in January asking them to schedule End-Year Reviews with their staff so that they are not late.</p> <p>Brian clarified that the DP prioritisation list was sent to NICSHR and managers receiving staff will likely be contacted this week. SO vacancies have now been prioritised and are being sent to NICSHR.</p> <p>Members noted the paper.</p>	<p>Anthony Harbinson</p>
<p>4</p>	<p>RHI Recommendations Update</p>	
	<p>Brian spoke to the paper.</p> <p>Bernie raised the fact that many of the recommendations are connected to cultural issues. She asked how this would be managed and whether the Staff Engagement, Equality & Diversity Directorate would be doing any work on this. Brian explained that there is no specific plan to look at culture but that the implementation of changes should bring about a shift in thinking. The recommendations should highlight the importance of following procedures and should also underscore the NICS Code of Conduct and principles.</p> <p>Anthony confirmed that HOCS plans to instigate a cultural audit. He also said that the Department needs to look at how concerns are raised and how they are dealt with.</p> <p>Members noted the paper.</p>	
<p>5</p>	<p>Avian Influenza Update</p>	
	<p>Robert explained that the paper provided yesterday is now out of date.</p> <p>Current confirmed and suspected case numbers are:</p>	

- 53 in GB
- 6 in ROI
- 4 in NI

Robert explained the various meetings that are taking place regularly. He said that there is a shortage of vets to carry out the duties required. He also explained the huge amount of communication that is involved, with stakeholders and media. Fiona also highlighted the impact of Avian Influenza on workloads within Customer Services Branch (CSB). This has required CSB to reprioritise work and the redistribution of work across the network of DAERA Direct offices.

Robert pointed out that the recent staffing resources being provided to his Group from other Groups has been invaluable. Fiona explained that the reallocation of resources to support AI both for VSAHG and CSB will have an inevitable knock-on effect on other work areas.

Robert advised colleagues that, in due course, there would be various national and international audits of the work carried out.

Sharon McCue asked about the impact of the virus on humans. Robert explained that meat and eggs are safe if properly cooked and that it is highly unlikely to transfer to humans from live birds.

Brian suggested that the mechanism previously used to record paused or stopped work should be regenerated.

Paul told colleagues that country parks have a process by which infected wild birds on their premises are dealt with.

Paula said that the vacancies, as a result of redeployed CSB staff, should be filled soon.

Paula referenced the vacancies in CSB offices, impact of redeploying staff and the need to ensure sufficient capacity remains to effectively induct new staff who may be allocated to these offices in the coming weeks given the work ongoing to fill vacancies at general service grades.

Members noted the update.

6 Finance Update

Roger spoke to the paper.

He advised that the first stage January Monitoring return was submitted to DoF on 3 December. In Stage One, the Department is declaring £7.1m of Capital DEL reduced requirements and £0.4m of Ring-fenced Resource DEL Non Cash Depreciation reduced requirements. January Monitoring Stage Two is due with DoF by 4 January 2022.

	<p>Regarding the Budget 2022-2025 exercise, Roger advised that on 10 December the Executive agreed to consult on Draft Budget proposals and on 13 December the Minister of Finance published a consultation document at a high level. He also advised that he would be working on Resource and Capital proposals based on the proposed allocations for DAERA.</p> <p>Bernie highlighted that the Green Growth agenda relies on staffing resources being available and asked whether this will be achievable. Anthony said that this will be a challenge but that the budget is not yet agreed. He said that prioritising and scheduling for the new mandate will be important. Brian explained that the business case for the Green Growth staffing resources has not been submitted to the Casework Committee yet and therefore is not approved yet. Members noted the paper.</p>	
7	<p>Agricultural Policy Strategy Update</p>	
	<p>Norman spoke to the paper.</p> <p>He advised that the Minister has not yet cleared the consultation document and that the Minister has a few changes he would like made.</p> <p>Sharon McCue asked about the independent review by Sir Peter Kendall. Norman said that the final report from this review has been sent to the Minister. Nothing in the review gave cause to divert from the current agenda and in general was positive about the policy direction.</p> <p>Roger spoke about the line ‘The framework should not give rise to unacceptable market distortions within the UK’ and asked if there are any significant differences between these proposals and those in GB. Norman explained that NI works within the EU State Aid rules whereas GB works with a tighter subsidy control regime.</p> <p>Gillian raised the issue of feed and the carbon footprint of importing it in. Norman explained that there will be an increased focus on the productivity of NI land. Gillian also asked about when the industry will be made aware of this new policy. Norman said that there will be a huge communication programme and that there will be an approximate two year lead-in period when industry can prepare.</p> <p>Bernie asked whether there will be an impact on the close working of NI and RoI. Norman said that they have regular meetings with DAFM and that the engagement has had great value. NI and RoI have many of the same issues. Bernie queried whether the new resilience payments will be given to smaller scale farms. Norman said that there will be a lower limit to the size of farms receiving payments.</p>	

	<p>Paul highlighted that there will be environmental questions arising from the policy and Norman said that environmental NGOs are part of the stakeholder group.</p> <p>Fiona emphasised the need to consider forestry and the use of available land for woodland planting.</p> <p>Members noted the paper</p>	
8	<p>New Ways of Working Update</p>	
	<p>Brian spoke to the paper.</p> <p>He explained that a significant amount of work has been done since the update given to DB in October. He informed members that the News and Views event this morning was focused on giving staff an update on activity being progressed by the NWoW Steering Group. He said that while the policy may be launched soon it was important to continue to comply with the Executive's current 'work from home' message. Staff should use the time to familiarise themselves with the policy and support available.</p> <p>He advised colleagues that TMT had agreed 4 guiding principles earlier in the month and that application of the policy will be overseen by Grade 7s. He explained that the agreed 40% attendance in the office is a general guide but not mandatory.</p> <p>Bernie asked why the decision had been made to change from the proposed 20% attendance to 40% attendance. Brian said that a staff survey informed the decision and that TMT had endorsed the proposed approach. However, it will be kept under review.</p> <p>Members noted the paper.</p>	
9	<p>NI Protocol Update</p>	
	<p>Robert spoke to the paper.</p> <p>He advised members that the group of 5 Veterinary and one Plant EU Inspectors continued their verification activities at the ports of entry. He said that there are weekly meetings with the European Commission and the discussions are making some progress. The Commission is due to take a 10 day break. On 1 January controls come into place for imports from EU to GB. Lord Frost has introduced a Bill to Westminster allowing for an exemption from the requirement for pre-notification of goods from the island of Ireland in order to ensure the continuation of unfettered access for NI goods.</p> <p>Members noted the paper.</p>	

10	2020/21 Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns Cases Update	
	<p>Roger spoke to the paper.</p> <p>He highlighted that there are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 reported cases; • 13 closed cases; and • 5 ongoing cases. <p>Roger explained that Finance Division is due to take over the raising concerns/whistleblowing policy from Corporate Services Division but that with current resources and workload, the recommendations included in the review into raising concerns/whistleblowing will not be progressed at this stage.</p> <p>Bernie highlighted how culture can affect productivity and asked if Staff Engagement, Equality & Diversity Directorate could address this issue. Roger said that he would look into this idea.</p> <p>Members noted and agreed the paper.</p>	Roger Downey
Closing Items		
11	Forward Look Agenda – January 2022	
	<p>Members agreed to add the following to the agenda –</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Avian Influenza Update 2. NI Protocol Update – Points of Entry 3. TB Policy Update (dependant on Ministerial clearance) 4. Covid-19 – Omicron Update (verbal during AOB) 	
12	Any other Business	
	No issues were raised.	
	Close	
Next Meeting: Monday 24 January 2022, at 10.00am via Webex		