

PROBATIONS BOARD FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
SPECIAL BOARD MEETING – FRIDAY 11 FEBRUARY 2022
10.45 AM – VIA VIDEO CONFERENCE
442ND MEETING – 38th OF THE TWELFTH TERM OF OFFICE

ATTENDANCE

Mr D Ashford, Chair
Mr N Bodger, Deputy Chair
Dr J Byrne
Mr K Donaghy
Mr P Douglas
Ms P Keenan
Mrs J Gillespie
Mr M Murray
Mr G OhEara

Ms D Gilchrist, 'Boardroom Apprentice'

OFFICIALS

Ms A Stewart, Chief Executive
Ms G Montgomery, A/Director of Operations
Dr G O'Hare, A/Director of Rehabilitation
Mr P King, Head of Finance & Estates
Ms G McGreevy, Head of Communications
Mrs C Sweeney, Head of HR & OD
Mr M Cox, Board Secretary
Mrs W Rodgers, Secretariat (Minutes)

OBSERVER

Ms A O'Hare, Personal Secretary

1. WELCOME, OPENING REMARKS AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The Board Chair thanked everyone for attending this Special Board meeting, which has a one item agenda, PBNI Draft Budget 2022-2025.

The Board Chair noted the passing of Mr Wall's mother and, on behalf of the Board, passed on their condolences.

There were no conflicts of interest advised. A quorum was confirmed.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were recorded from Mr D Wall, Member and Dr G O'Hare, A/Director of Rehabilitation

3. PBNI DRAFT BUDGET 2022 – 2025

The Board Chair informed the meeting that, although the Department of Finance (DOF) is consulting on the budget, the Executive has not agreed it, and Probation is preparing a

budget based on a draft allocation from the Department of Justice. This meeting has been called for the Board to take a position on the draft budget and to inform the direction of travel for PBNI for 2022-2023 budget and beyond. The Chief Executive and Head of Finance & Estates will talk through the detail of the paper presented.

Board Chair invited Mrs Gillespie, Chair of the CRC, to provide a summary of the discussions from the Corporate Resource Committee (CRC) held on 28 January 2022. The Committee had been asked to consider the draft budget paper by the Board and bring back its conclusions to this meeting.

Mrs Gillespie commented that budgetary position in the future is made even more uncertain because of the emerging political context. It was noted that the Department of Justice (DOJ) will conclude that there will be a higher level of cuts in its budgetary allocation compared to other departments. It was emphasised that the headline cut to PBNI's baseline was 2% but actually it is a 5.3% cut. The CRC, in its discussions, established core principles for discussion at this meeting, which are: to maintain our practice standards and to mitigate the impact on our service users and the risk to public safety.

The risks were seen as:

- Reduced budgets for the PBNI will be necessitate further deviations in the PBNI Practice Standards that will have an adverse impact on service users and increase risk to safety of the public.
- Pay modernisation is not implemented and PBNI cannot retain experienced social work staff to manage its complex and higher risk caseload.
- Budgetary pressures and financial uncertainties inhibit long term planning and decision making
- Increasing caseload arising from the justice system recovery from Covid-19 will impact further on staff workload pressures and contribute to delays in the justice system.

With the issues seen as:

- Adequate staff numbers to deliver the probation service in accordance with agreed professional standards.
- Pay modernisation is not delivered resulting in continuing vacancies among experienced social work qualified staff.
- Uncertainty on the probable reductions in years 2 & 3 of the budget cycle prevent strategic decisions being taken.
- Sick absence and wellbeing issues rise at a time of reducing budgets and staff vacancies.

Mrs Gillespie, on behalf of CRC, commended the paper presented to the Board.

The Board Chair invited the Head of Finance & Estates to take members through the paper.

The Head of Finance & Estates advised that a 2% cut on the opening position is approximately a 5.3% reduction in the 2021-22 allocation. . In the absence of a budget agreed by the Executive, the Permanent Secretaries have the authority to provide all bodies with a percentage of the opening allocation. This is likely to happen if the Executive is not formed following the May Assembly Elections. The paper sets out the scope to scale up or down if monies become available.

The Head of Finance & Estates took members through the Core Principles; the PBNI's Cost Base – core funding; other revenue headings; the probable shortfall and the

inescapable pressures. The shortfall will be £1.1m in year 1, £1.5m in year 2 and £1.8m in year 3. The costs of pay modernisation have been excluded from the estimated requirements, as it is assumed that the Department will support the funding proposals and cover the additional costs. The initial costings for this is £1.3m across the 3 year budget period to deliver the changes required.

The Board was taken through the options as detailed in the paper, which included: the risk to community & voluntary sector grant funding, staff headcount and reducing contact with service users.

Members were advised that for illustrative purposes, probation officers numbers are used to illustrate the cuts in headcount. In year 1 the cuts would require a reduction of 15 probation officers, a further reduction to 25 in year 2 and 33 fewer in year 3. Recruitment could be controlled to achieve the cut in headcount through natural attrition but there is no control over where the attrition would be and this could be a significant consideration.

The A/Director of Operations provided detail on the impact of the reduced headcount. It would affect the supervision of high and medium risk service users and create a greater risk to public safety through a fundamental shift away from the current Practice Standards. Headcount will have to be aligned with higher risk service users and therefore there is a prospect of cessation of almost all community funding.

Reducing the estate will be another option, although Probation has high lease costs some with maintenance clauses.

There was discussion on the level and effectiveness of the funding of programmes, in particular Problem Solving Justice (PSJ). Its funding is currently ring fenced however, if Probation had the monies added to its baseline, then the funds could be used more effectively for service delivery. Members were informed that once phase 3 of the ECO project is completed, there is no scope a further roll out of the PSJ strategy.

There is no indication of capital allocation at this stage. There is a bid in for £2.4m for funding of, in the main, IT projects, including 'Causeway'.

Mrs Gillespie commented on the issues around the potential move away from the current Practice Standards and the potential increased risk to the public even if the Organisation can proceed with some level of certainty in year one. She also commented that the capability to be able to scale up or down is important and has been covered by the Head of Finance & Estates. The principles, which had been presented, should be the focus in the decision-making.

The Board agreed that the Board Chair, Chief Executive and Head of Finance & Estates should make a formal response to the Department of Finance (DOF) consultation. It should cover Probation's performance, health and wellbeing together with the pay modernisation under funding by £1.3m. Initially, the Department should be asked to agree to mitigate the impact on Probation of the budgetary cuts to minimise the increased risk to public safety. Greater flexibility around the funding of PSJ would help by adding it to the baseline.

Members discussed the issues around maintaining and recruiting experienced staff in the context of maintaining the supervision of high-risk service users. Having a hybrid approach with home visits and phone calls with service users was discussed. The issues related to the effectiveness of this method of contact were explained and the A/Director of Operations advised that this was not an option and explained why. Members also

discussed the repercussions when Probation does not have the capacity to do areas of work and the implications for other departments. It was agreed that a reduction in contact with service users would be likely to have a negative outcome for service users. Post-Covid could lead to greater levels of offending at the lower risk level and therefore more service users on Probation's register, higher costs generally and those falling significantly to the Department of Health (DOH) rather than the Criminal Justice System. The strategies for years 2 and 3 would be looking primarily at addiction services, which could impact on the DOH and Department of Communities (DOC). The Justice Committee had agreed that service users are having difficulty in accessing services within the community and this acknowledgement was important. Probation's Psychology Department is currently carrying out assessments instead of the Health Trusts. Probation should continue to press for funding and protection through ring fencing for its work in this area. Members noted the Probation's work on social care and welfare crosses into the Health Trusts' areas of responsibility.

The A/Director of Operations advised that research is currently being undertaken in England & Wales on the impact of reducing contact with service users. This will provide important information, when it is completed.

The Board agreed to the approach and the way forward, proposed in the paper. It was accepted that it is an uncertain situation and the new Board will need to look at the established principles and agree the way forward.

The Board Chair thanked the Officials for putting the paper together and explaining the issues so well.

4. OTHER BUSINESS

The Board Chair thanked everyone for attending. He reminded members that the Board meeting on 25 February 2022 would be off site. He thanked members and officials for facilitating this extra meeting.

D Ashford QFSM
Board Chair

Date