

PROBATION BOARD FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

SPECIAL BOARD MEETING – Friday 6 October 2023

9.30 am – Conference Room, PBNI HQ

ATTENDANCE

BOARD MEMBERS

Mr M Murray, Chair
Ms E Patterson, Deputy Chair
Ms M Brunt (by Webex)
Mr B Ingram
Mr J Johnston
Ms A Lloyd-Stevens
Mrs C Magee
Mr J Byrne
Mr K Donaghy

OFFICIALS

Mrs A Stewart, Chief Executive
Ms G Montgomery, Director of Operations
Mr S Hamilton, Director of Operations
Mr P King, Head of Finance & Estates
Mrs C Sweeney, Head of HR & OD
Mrs A Abraham, Business Support Manager

1. WELCOME, OPENING REMARKS AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The Board Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and confirmed the purpose of the Special Board Meeting was to consider and approve the way forward in respect of Pay Modernisation. There were no conflicts of interest.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were recorded from Ms Mongan, Mr Bodger, Ms G McGreevy and Ms J Fitzsimons.

3. PAY MODERNISATION UPDATE (PAPER)

The Board Chair updated Members on meetings and engagements since the Board Meeting on 22 September 2023. The Committee Chairs' Working Group had met on the morning of Friday 29 September and following discussion on progress of the Pay Modernisation Business case agreed to write to the Permanent Secretary expressing the Board's increasing concern at the increasing urgency to address the risk to recruitment and retention of staff and the risk to public safety. To date, the Board Chair has had no response to his letter of 30 September 2023, a copy of which is in today's papers.

The Chief Executive, Director of Operations, Head of Finance & Estates and Head of HR & OD had been invited to a meeting on Thursday 28 September 2023 with DOJ officials, to discuss Pay Modernisation. PBNI had provided a paper highlighting key issues that remain to be resolved. At the end of the meeting PBNI was asked to submit a briefing paper setting out proposals on mitigating the issues of affordability and repercussiveness which had been raised by the Department. The meeting was brief and there were no DoF or legal representatives present. A further telephone/teams meeting was convened for Monday 2 October 2023. Ms Stewart confirmed that the briefing paper was submitted on 5 October. Some basic finance queries from the DoJ had been received that evening. The DoJ confirmed they would be seeking further advice from the Departmental Solicitors and would then convene a meeting with PBNI on the Business Case to be submitted to the DoF for final approval.

The Board Chair referred to the Pay Modernisation Update Paper and asked Members to consider this approach which would create a single pay framework, a single agreed set of Terms and Conditions and an arrangement which could support ease of transition.

In response to the question of submitting a pay remit to NICS staff for back pay, Mr King expressed caution in that it may compromise progress on the full business case and it would be for a small one off payment of £550. Strong legal advice on this would be required.

Mr Byrne emphasised the importance of informing staff of timelines for DoJ supporting and sending the business case to DoF, an indicative date for DoF approval and a realistic date for payment to staff. Discussion took place around Members holding informal meetings with the Permanent Secretary and key officials to encourage them to resolve the situation expediently.

In response to a request for statistics on attrition rates and vacancies, Mrs Sweeney informed Members as follows:

Attrition Rate	15.4% @ 1 October 2023
Vacancies	18.62 Probation Grade, 14 Corporate Grade
Sick Absence	7.2% and rising

She confirmed that 58% of Probation Officer Grade staff had only 4 years or less service.

Members agreed that if these trends continued, there would also be serious implications for Courts and Prisons.

Ms Montgomery advised that 3 out of 5 teams were currently deviating from Standards (40%) due to reduced PO resources. Currently one AM and 4 POs from L&OD and PPRU have been redeployed to the North Belfast and Belfast ISU teams. There are vacancies in Rural South due to 2 sick absences and 2 maternity leaves.

Mr Hamilton advised that NIPS had asked that PBNI consider options to address the increasing prison population, which PBNI would not be in a position to take on at this stage because of the staffing difficulties. In a similar vein, there would also be an issue with recruiting and retaining staff to take the 3rd phase of ECO roll out forward. It may also be the case that Programmes will need to be run by non-social work qualified staff which is not ideal.

The Board Chair summarised the main points and agreed actions as follows:

Action 1: The Board Chair to write a further letter to the Permanent Secretary to seek a response to the letter of 30 September 2023 and request an urgent meeting now rather than wait until after Mr Pengelly's meetings with PBNI Union Representatives (confirmed for 12 October), or Mr McGuinness' briefing from the Departmental Solicitors.

Action 2: The Chief Executive to meet Mr McGuinness after his meeting with the Departmental Solicitor. Date to be confirmed.

Action 3: Members encouraged to engage informally with DoJ officials.

Action 4: Members to continue to engage with staff on the ground.

4. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING: FRIDAY 27 OCTOBER 2023, 9.30 AM

The meeting ended at 11.15 am.

Mr Max Murray CBE
Board Chair

Date