

Minutes of ninety-second meeting of the Board of the Public Appointments Service held remotely by Zoom, at 2.00pm on 17th February 2021

Present (Board): Mr. Tom Moran, Ms. Mary Hurley, Ms. Anne-Marie Taylor, Ms. Shirley Comerford, Ms. Mary Connaughton, Mr. John O'Callaghan, Ms. Anne O'Connor, Mr. Dave Cagney, Ms. Catherine Dobbins (Secretary).

Apologies: Dr. Eddie Molloy.

The Board wished to formally pass on their condolences to Eddie Molloy on his recent loss.

It was noted that the Chair and Mary Connaughton had been recently reappointed to the Board for a second term.

Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising

The minutes were agreed.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

CEO's Report for the Board and Operational Report

The Board noted the Operational Activity Report, which was circulated in advance of the meeting.

The CEO updated the Board on a number of key areas and current trends in activity. She highlighted that the key focus of PAS remains both on delivering the strategy, and particularly the key strategic projects (Nova, building works, and ED&I), and meeting the various challenges of operating remotely such as the administrative burden, maintaining quality, meeting the needs of clients and candidates, and maintaining staff engagement.

The CEO provided a general overview of operational activity. This included an increase of 27% in the number of applications being processed in comparison to the previous seven quarters; however, it was noted that advertised posts are down 3%, assessments down 43% and assignments down 23%. The CEO also provided the comparison percentages in these areas overall for 2020 versus 2019. The CEO discussed the move to demand-led recruitment for general service grades. Although the number of assignments is down significantly year-on-year, the CEO informed the Board that this may not be an ongoing issue as much of it related to the reaction by clients to onboarding staff during Covid and demand had increased as clients have developed processes in this area. It was noted that it was too soon to say if this was a continuing trend but would be kept under review. It was also noted that there are increased challenges in relation to the provision of reasonable accommodations around Covid, both in terms of increased demand for accommodations and in terms of staff for customer facing roles (who cannot work remotely). Dave Cagney outlined the supports available from the centre in relation to issues such as a remote and consistent onboarding experience for new staff, but it was acknowledged that this is primarily the responsibility of the local HR Manager. However, the Board was pleased to note that there does not appear to be any significant issues or inconsistencies in this process across the civil service, and that in many ways new staff are getting a better and timelier onboarding experience.

The CEO discussed the targets for delivery as set out in the Super 8 Performance Dashboard, and informed the Board that these will be reviewed at Management Board level in March, once the results of the client surveys are in. She stated that PAS wished to create ambitious targets in setting timescales. She discussed the meeting of the working group set up to review the Super 8 report and indicated that the very relevant suggestions received had either been implemented, or would be implemented over time once the relevant data is captured.

The CEO provided an update for the Board on the new AGS recruitment, and indicated that PAS is in a position to roll out these campaigns once the Regulations are signed by the Minister (an area that is outside of PAS control).

The CEO provided an update on the additional recruitment being undertaken for the HSE at CO level; it was noted that HSE funded staff have been taken on for this work, and that a monitoring group are meeting on a weekly basis to oversee this project.

The CEO informed the Board that the “deep-dive” into large volume recruitment, to ensure the approaches, tools and data are being used to best effect to manage large volume campaigns, has been and the first draft is to be reviewed by the Management Board on 24th February.

The CEO provided an update on the ‘Trusted Partner’ project for which PAS has procured assistance from Cpl. It was noted that the advisory service aspect of the PAS role has been underdeveloped in recent years, and it has emerged as a priority area in the strategy development process. It was noted that this is both an area where PAS can add value, and is also part of our legislative remit. The importance of PAS involvement, and its ability to provide professional advice in areas which relate to its core recruitment function was acknowledged. The Board discussed the aims of PAS around this project and the expected outcomes. It was noted that the offering will be developed in conjunction with clients and will involve the identification of thematic areas where PAS can add the most value in terms of advice, insight and support; it was noted that it presents a strategic opportunity to examine what might be missing from existing services and develop an offering which adds the most value for public service clients, in areas which are directly related to the PAS role.

The CEO highlighted the results of recent internal and civil service-wide staff surveys; these appear to reflect the work PAS has done to support staff. She acknowledged the work of management and the People and Culture team in supporting initiatives such as those related to staff wellbeing.

The CEO provided an update on the key strategic projects and informed the Board that regular updates (as outlined in the accompanying schedule) will be included in the Super 8 Report. The Board noted the update on the building project, with contract signed on 24th December and all of the preparation now complete; the first phase will involve the development of a sample interview room which will allow key decisions to be made. It was noted that the project is approx. a month behind schedule due to the Covid restrictions, but that there is a meeting with OPW next week to agree the next steps.

An update was also provided on ED&I and the upcoming inclusive recruitment event which will focus on disability and race. It was noted that PAS had made a written submission to the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community. It was noted that PAS is developing a staff event for International Women’s Day on 8th March; this will be an opportunity to introduce the newly recruited Head of ED&I, who is starting on 1st March, as well as providing for the ‘soft launch’ internally of our ED&I strategy. It was noted that International Migrants Day on 18th December provided an opportunity to reinforce the

expansion of citizenship eligibility to encompass those with international protection status and non-EEA spouses/children of EEA citizens.

Risk Management

The Board discussed a specific risk area in relation to the vetting of candidates for appointments to State Board positions. It was agreed that the Board would discuss this area further at the next meeting.

The Board noted the recent equality case where a candidate had been awarded a sum due to the feedback provided. The Board acknowledged the importance of professional and considered feedback and agreed that it was important that PAS learn from this. The updated training for selection board members in this regard was welcomed.

Financial Position

The CEO updated the Board on the 2020 outturn and the current financial position. It was noted that staff costs were unfavourable by €111k at the end of the year, in line with forecast, and that DPER provided approval in principle for a virement of €200k from A2 costs to cover the additional expenditure; this will be applied in the final year-end figures for the Appropriation Accounts.

The CEO advised the Board that additional assessment and testing costs brought total expenditure in the area of Recruitment Costs over budget, however this was offset by significant savings in Interview Board costs (with lower costs due to the move to remote and demand led interviewing). It was noted that the travel and subsistence overspend in 2020 related to courier costs for sending equipment to staff to work remotely and issuing papers for selection boards.

The CEO outlined the capital spend for 2020, which was focused primarily on the upgrade of the Chapter House facility, with a budget of €1,980k. The Board was advised that, in December, agreement was reached between DPER, OPW and PAS that the funding allocated to the project in 2020 could be paid to OPW to fund the work.

In relation to 2021, it was noted that the overspend in A1 mainly relates to additional staffing for HSE work, which will be funded by the HSE. A review of all business plans and requests for funding is underway before the final allocation to cost centres will be completed.

Update on Internal Audit

The CEO provided an update on the internal audit provider. The Board noted the decision to use the framework to procure a partner for the next three years, and also to procure a provider for the next three audits as an interim measure.

The Board noted that the Asset Management Audit had been accepted by the Audit Committee, and that the Chair had communicated with the CEO to have the actions implemented urgently due to the level of assurance offered by the report.

It was noted that the Impact of Standardisation Audit had also been accepted by the Committee at their additional meeting in January.

It was noted that a draft of the Audit Committee Annual report is with the Committee for review.

Update on Super 8 (including update on Delivery of Strategic Projects)

The Board noted the proposed reporting schedule and had no issues with same. It was noted that a client survey is underway and that a candidate survey will issue in the coming weeks.

The Board were very satisfied with the report and agreed that it highlighted areas on which the Board might focus its attention. It was agreed that it is critical that clients have faith in it, and welcomed the proposed plans to engage with clients in relation to the metrics.

It was noted that different levels of this report will be analysed at different levels in the organisation, as the report can be examined in more depth by specific relevant areas. It was also agreed that it would be important for staff at all levels to see how their input feeds into the overall Super 8 report (both positive and negative).

It was noted that the targets will be subject to ongoing review, benchmarking and engagement with customer groups as this dynamic document develops.

Key Risk Area: Cyber and Data Security and Remote Working

The Board noted the paper, which had been circulated in advance. They agreed that it was reassuring in terms of both data and cyber security risks. The CEO outlined the key role of the DPO throughout the pandemic in ensuring data protection was front of mind when rolling out remote working and that she had worked with all of the relevant units to ensure services delivered were fully compliant with data protection legislation. The business partnering approach adopted by the DPO was highlighted. The focus on ensuring high levels of cyber security was also noted, including the independent validation of cyber security and the measures put in place to deliver high quality and secure remote services using zoom.

The additional demands on staff were noted in terms of protecting data while working remotely, and the provision of additional equipment to facilitate this was welcomed.

It was noted that the Management Board are currently considering which elements of remote working will continue in the future and will consider which aspects are sustainable or can be adapted to make them more sustainable remotely.

It was noted that the fact the PAS may be delayed returning to the office due to building works may allow PAS to learn from the experience of others in areas such as vaccination, social connection and any other issues which may arise. The Board welcomed the establishment by PAS of a Future of Work Group (at CO and EO level) to explore expectations and challenges and escalate these for further discussion.

Overall the Board agreed that they received assurance from this report and noted that the main risk continued to be behaviour, which highlights the importance of ongoing training in these two key areas.

Risk Management Business Plan and Corporate Risk Register (including Executive Summary of Key Risks)

The Board noted the documents which had been circulated in advance, including the Risk Management Business Plan which sets out the programme of deep dives to be conducted in 2021 by the Risk Management Group; the Corporate Risk Register; and the Executive Summary of the highest-level risks faced by PAS at present.

Board Evaluation Action Plan

The Board agreed the draft Action Plan and timelines, which had been circulated in advance. This item will remain on the agenda until all actions have been implemented.

Review of SWFP in the Public Service

Dave Cagney made a presentation to the Board on the area of strategic workforce planning. The Board acknowledged the importance of an effective work force planning system for PAS, and agreed that the move to demand led recruitment has increased its importance. It was agreed that buy-in at senior levels was critical and recognition that it was not just a HR function is key.

The areas of autonomy and accountability and the need to balance these was discussed. It was agreed that there are examples of best practice in aspects of work force planning in the public service. It was agreed that this area may feed into the role of PAS as a trusted partner and that evidence from the Super 8 might demonstrate the impact of effective or non-effective workforce planning.

Next meeting

To be arranged for April.