

Minutes of ninety-eight meeting of the Board of the Public Appointments Service held in Chapter House, at 1pm on 20th April 2022

Present (Board): Mr. Tom Moran (Chairperson), Ms. Anne-Marie Taylor, Ms. Shirley Comerford, Ms. Mary Connaughton, Dr. Eddie Molloy, Ms. Catherine Dobbins (Secretary).

Apologies: Ms. Anne O'Connor.

The Board commenced the meeting with a tour of the new Chapter House. They expressed their thanks to Brian Jackson, Head of Business Support and Facilities, for both the engaging tour and the ongoing management of this key organisational project. The Board agreed that the new Chapter House was very reflective of PAS values and was keen that these values would be highlighted as part of any official building opening.

The Chairman updated the Board on the progress with outstanding Board appointments, and the Board agreed that public service Board nominees have helped integrate PAS further into the wider public service HR arena. The Chairman informed the Board the membership of the Audit Committee was also due for review, with a number of members coming to the end of their terms of office. He acknowledged the excellent contributions made over their tenure and agreed to work with the CEO on sourcing suitable replacements.

Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising

The minutes were agreed.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Reports for the Board

Operational Report

The Board noted the Operational Activity Report (and the supporting papers), which were circulated in advance of the meeting.

The CEO outlined the three main priorities for PAS for 2022; improving service delivery, managing the return to the office, and delivery on our key strategic projects. She indicated that the Management Board is aware of the priorities and have put the structures in place to allow PAS to manage these priorities through these uncertain times.

The CEO noted that the Recruitment Service Delivery lens remains amber; although PAS is achieving targets in terms of positions filled, it is not on target in terms of recruitment timelines (except in the area of Local Government recruitment) and there continues to be issues with General Grade Assignments. Some of the Board Members believed that the Recruitment Service Delivery lens should be red at this stage, as the service delivery KPIs do not appear to be moving in the right direction. The CEO acknowledged these timescales, and the delays in agreeing on client and candidate feedback mechanisms. However, she outlined the work underway with Qualtrics and Ipsos which will result in a comprehensive sustainable customer engagement strategy which will establish appropriate candidate and client touchpoints where satisfaction should be measured.

In discussing some highlights from the Board papers, the CEO highlighted the new State Boards website, which allows for the dynamic management of content. She also updated the Board on the recent TCO campaign held specifically for candidates with Ukrainian language skills. It was noted that this is a 'rolling' campaign, whereby applications are processed on receipt, and that PAS is also piloting the introduction of part-time working contracts as part of this campaign. The CEO informed the Board that the interview process has also been streamlined for both this competition and the general TCO competition; it was noted that the competition launched on 30th March, the first interviews took place on 8th April; 19 candidates were assigned last week and there are an additional 15 in clearance, with another 40 due to be interviewed on Saturday as part of a TCO Blitz. The Board agreed that the key learnings from this campaign will be critical to service improvement going forward, and that the changed process and level of advance client engagement will be used as a model for upcoming TCO campaigns.

The CEO outlined how the Future of Work Group has been central to the planning for the return to Chapter House and the transition to Hybrid Working, with sub-groups looking at digital collaboration, our workspace, new ways of working, communications, file management and our hybrid operating model. It was noted that each sub-group has a senior management sponsor and that significant progress has been made in each of these areas. It was noted that PAS will transition to Hybrid Service Delivery, as set out in the paper on the Hybrid Operating Model, with the future service delivery model informed by the needs of customers and the business, while being aligned to the PAS Flexible Working Policy.

In relation to Nova, the CEO updated the Board on the establishment of the peer review process; it was noted that project risks around the contract and procurement process have been identified and mitigation actions have been put in place, following consultation with a range of parties, including OPG, OGCI and CSSO. The Board expressed some concern with PAS being one of the first to source a cloud-based service, but acknowledged that there was no other option given the need to proceed in line with the agreed schedule. The CEO informed the Board that the Advisory Committee has private and public sector expertise and it will provide appropriate support and challenge to the Nova team. It was agreed that the Chair of this Group would speak to the Board once the peer review process has been established. It was noted that the Nova timescales have been pushed out due to the issues that have arisen in the procurement process, and the CEO informed the Board that the Management Board had considered this matter carefully and agreed to the extended timescales in order to ensure that the procurement process would be conducted thoroughly, and that the potential contract issues would be addressed in advance. The Board agreed that longer deadlines may have been more appropriate upfront, given the likely challenges with the process. The CEO informed the Board that this was an extremely complex contractual arrangement and that PAS had to take the lead on resolving any potential contractual issues. The Board noted that the RFT should issue in May and should be pushed through quickly due to the level of work done in advance of this stage. It was noted that implementing the new system will also be a challenge. The CEO acknowledged that Nova is currently the most significant organisational risk, but she considered that the riskiest phase has been completed. It was acknowledged that it will be a challenge to train clients and board members in order to ensure Nova usage is maximised; the Board noted that a communications and change programme is being put in place.

The CEO informed that Board that good progress has been made across all three key ED&I related change areas in Q1 2022, and key projects continue to progress well, including the two key projects underway with the ERSI and the EDI Diagnostic Project.

The CEO updated the Board on the opening session of the Public Service Recruiter Network, which was held on 5th April. It was noted that the meeting was attended by 58

participants from 31 organisations. The CEO outlined the purpose of the Network, which is to facilitate greater collaboration in recruitment and to maintain the high standards that are in place across the public service. The Board noted the strong focus on the sharing of best practice across the public service, identifying common challenges/opportunities and working together to attract the best people to the public service. The focus of the initial session was on 'Best Practice in Reviews' and it was acknowledged that the feedback was very positive.

A strategy mid-point review was conducted to ensure appropriate progress of the delivery of the strategy and to ensure that any necessary corrective action is taken to keep delivery on target. It included both a data gathering exercise with the Management Board and their teams, and a follow-up workshop with the Management Board. The Report was enclosed with the Board papers. The CEO informed the Board that PAS appears to be on target to achieve all of the strategic goals. It was noted that the recruitment service delivery area was green as this related to strategic projects in this area, rather than service delivery KPIs which are tracked in the Super 8.

The Board noted the strategic programme of work and updates on strategic projects, which were included with the Board papers. The Board suggested that the timelines in the Strategic Programme of Work should not be changed (as deadlines change), and that this issue had been raised at the Audit Committee. The CEO agreed to discuss this with Project Services.

The Board agreed that some project work may have to be re-prioritised to focus on service delivery. It was noted that non key projects had already been reviewed and timescales moved out, as set out in the strategic programme of work. However, it was noted that the Management Board agreed that there were some priority projects where it is critical to maintain momentum.

Risk Management

The CEO informed the Board that the ongoing issues in relation to Service Delivery Timescales has led to an increase in the level of risk in that area, and that this risk will be discussed as the Key Risk Area for this meeting. The Board noted that the implementation of a VOIP phone system is now underway which will address the previously identified risk around an unsupported telephone system. It was noted that the Audit Committee had discussed the Schrems key risk in detail at their most recent meeting in March, and that the DPO had subsequently presented a paper to the Management Board; it was noted that the Audit Committee was satisfied with the approach being taken by the DPO and PAS to do as much as possible to mitigate this risk. The CEO outlined how IT have put a plan in place to address the findings from the Internal Audit into Cyber Security and Remote Working Security, with the majority of the recommendations already implemented; this includes the appointment of a new Head of Cyber, who is due to take up duty in PAS on 9th May.

Financial Position

The Financial Report for end March was included in the Board papers. The Board noted that it is very challenging on A2, particularly in relation to expenditure on board members and that capital expenditure may also be challenging; it was noted that engagement with DPER is ongoing in this regard.

Update from the Audit Committee

The Board noted the Audit Report on Internal Controls which had been included with the Board papers.

Clare McGrath, Chair of the Audit Committee, joined the Board by telephone to discuss the last Audit Committee meeting and to present the Annual Report of the Audit Committee. She discussed the three areas identified for escalation to the management board from the last Audit Committee meeting.

It was noted that the Committee were concerned not to be stepping into Management or PAS Board areas of responsibility and that they keep this in mind when carrying out their duties. The Board agreed to keep under review the areas of concern for the audit committee, including delivery timescales, and Nova related risks, including the need for it to be agile and adaptable. It was agreed that the PAS Board would carve out some time to review the potential future requirements of Nova in order to ensure all horizons are being considered and it be being adequately future proofed.

Audit Committee Annual Report

The Chair of the Audit Committee thanked her colleagues on the Audit Committee and acknowledged the support from PAS staff. She expressed satisfaction with the output and productivity of the internal auditors and satisfaction with the implementation of audit recommendations and reports received from PAS management. She stated that the update of the financial system in 2021 had addressed a number of Audit Committee concerns, and noted that the appointment of a dedicated Cyber Security resource in May was very welcome. She noted that the Committee had achieved its plans for 2021 and had developed a new Strategic Audit Plan for 2022-24. She noted that all of the recommendations from the IPA review of the internal audit function had been implemented in 2021 and noted that external membership on the risk management committee was still under consideration.

Report on Internal Controls

The Board noted the Report, which was provided in advance of the meeting.

Key Risk Area: Service Delivery

Sandra Cairns, Margaret McCabe and John Keegan presented to the Board on this key risk area, and outlined the high level action plans in place for each area.

The Board discussed some of the challenges and also the potential solutions identified in detail. It was noted that both PAS and clients would like to see a smoother transition from TCO to CO, and that PAS is engaging with DPER in relation to this. It was noted that PAS has made a submission to DPER, as part of the Pay Talks, for priority areas they would like DPER to seek agreement on. The Board discussed formally writing to DPER again in relation to key areas such as flexible working, return to work flexibility and the transition from temporary to permanent. It was noted that these areas were already flagged to CSMB and are to be included as part of the reform programme. The Board noted the need to shape the client expectations and to provide expert advice to clients on recruitment, particularly around the labour market context.

The Board noted that PAS is working with Departments in relation to delays with State Boards process outside of PAS control, and in relation to recording this type of delay for all campaigns.

The Board asked if the Heads of Recruitment were comfortable that the efforts to improve service delivery would work. The Board was assured that by Q3 most of the delays outside of large volume will be reversed. In relation to large volume, it is anticipated that there will be a significant improvement, but it may not be sufficient, in the current market, to achieve the 80% target.

The Head of Recruitment agreed to consider how AI may be used more and to ensure it features in Nova.

The Board noted that the action plans and improvements to date were encouraging and it was good to see the drive and buy-in from staff. The Board agreed that if there is anything they can to assist they would be glad to do so.

It was noted that the return to the office from June to September will see the move to a hybrid operating model, and that there is ongoing engagement and discussions with teams as to what options suit all of the individual recruitment areas. It was noted that any decisions in relation to this will involve discussions with clients and teams, and will consider both efficiencies and client expectations and national and international benchmarking. It was noted that it has been agreed that shortlisting will continue remotely, and that consideration is being given to hybrid/on-site interviews above certain levels. It was noted that flexibility continues to be important in this phase in addition to data based decision-making.

The Board complimented staff for continuing to deliver services in difficult circumstances over the last two years, and for doing things in ways that had not been done before.

Next meeting

The meeting will be held on 22nd June 2022 at 2pm.