

Title of Meeting	159 th Meeting of the Public Health Agency Board
Date	14 December 2023 at 1.30pm
Venue	Fifth Floor Meeting Room, 12/22 Linenhall Street, Belfast

Present

Mr Colin Coffey	- Chair
Mr Aidan Dawson	- Chief Executive
Dr Joanne McClean	- Director of Public Health
Ms Heather Reid	- Interim Director of Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Professionals
Mr Stephen Wilson	- Interim Director of Operations
Mr Craig Blaney	- Non-Executive Director
Mr John Patrick Clayton	- Non-Executive Director
Ms Anne Henderson	- Non-Executive Director
Ms Deepa Mann-Kler	- Non-Executive Director
Professor Nichola Rooney	- Non-Executive Director
Mr Joseph Stewart	- Non-Executive Director

In Attendance

Dr Aideen Keaney	- Director of Quality Improvement
Ms Tracey McCaig	- Director of Finance and Corporate Governance, SPPG
Mr Brendan Whittle	- Director of Community Care, SPPG
Mr Robert Graham	- Secretariat

Apologies

Mr Robert Irvine	- Non-Executive Director
------------------	--------------------------

140/23 | Item 1 – Welcome and Apologies

140/23.1 | The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were noted from Mr Robert Irvine.

141/23 | Item 2 – Declaration of Interests

141/23.1 | The Chair asked if anyone had interests to declare relevant to any items on the agenda.

141/23.2 | Mr Clayton declared an interest in relation to Public Inquiries as Unison is engaging with the Inquiries.

142/23 Item 3 – Minutes of previous meeting held on 16 November 2023

142/23.1 The minutes of the Board meeting held on 16 November 2023 were **APPROVED** as an accurate record of that meeting, subject to an amendment in paragraph 135/23.3 where Mr Clayton asked that it be clarified that his comment was being made following a suggestion that that the Performance Management Report would be discussed by members of the Planning, Performance and Resources Committee.

143/23 Item 4 – Matters Arising

143/23.1 The Chair noted that an action log giving updates on each of the actions from the last meeting had been shared with members in advance. He asked if members had any queries they wished to raise.

143/23.2 Mr Clayton noted that members had received a copy of the paper that had been shared with the Department around staffing in health protection. He said that at the last Governance and Audit Committee (GAC) meeting, there had been a discussion around the risk on staffing on the Corporate Risk Register and how there should be one overall risk rather than separate risks for each directorate, and he queried if this needed to be revisited.

143/23.3 The Chief Executive advised that at the Accountability Review meeting that morning, it was suggested that this should be a separate risk given the Agency's reliance on health protection staff. He added that this will also feature on the Department's Risk Register given the level of advice that PHA health protection staff give the Department. He said that the Department has asked that PHA develops an action plan and keeps the Department updated. The Chair advised that the Department is keen to help PHA resolve this risk and acknowledges that the PHA is doing all that it can. He said that the Board also needs to keep this on its agenda.

143/23.4 Dr McClean noted that the Department draws on PHA's resources and PHA provides the Department with a lot of support. She added that HSC terms and conditions are less attractive than those in the Department. The Chair asked whether PHA has had any discussions with Queen's University. Dr McClean replied that there has been some discussions around joint appointments and she had met with Queen's 6/8 weeks ago. She explained that in order to secure a joint appointment an individual has to be an academic and have carried out a lot of research.

143/23.5 The Chief Executive said that the Permanent Secretary was assured that PHA is taking the appropriate steps and welcomed PHA exploring the possibility of "reverse" joint appointments. Dr McClean advised that PHA has a number of individuals who carry out teaching roles at Queen's.

143/23.6 Ms Mann-Kler noted that there is a challenge for the Agency because of the impact of individuals being able to receive much higher salaries to work in the Republic of Ireland. The Chair said that this point was made, but not accepted at the Accountability Review meeting.

143/23.7 Mr Clayton asked if the paper on campaigns could be shared with members. Mr Wilson agreed to do this **(Action 1 – Mr Wilson)**.

144/23 Item 5 – Chair’s Business

144/23.1 The Chair advised that he had met with Mr Peter Toogood who will be taking over the role of head of PHA’s Sponsor Branch. He added that he will meet with him again in January. He said that he also met with the Permanent Secretary and it was a good meeting. He added that over the next week he will be meeting with more senior staff in PHA and that in the New Year he wishes to meet with all PHA staff across different offices.

144/23.2 The Chair reported that he has met with Ms Judith Savage from EY and he has also had meetings with the Equality Commission and with RQIA.

144/23.3 The Chair said that he had attended an event arranged as part of the AAA Screening Programme and that he would like to see more publicity in the press around such events.

144/23.4 The Chair reported that he and the Chief Executive had attended the PHA Accountability Meeting with the Permanent Secretary earlier that day and that it was a positive meeting which covered a range of areas. He said that the Board can expect to receive the updated HSC Framework Document as well as the Partnership Agreement shortly and that there would be a session for the Board to look at these and what they mean for PHA. He noted that the Agri-food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) was one of the first organisations to sign a Partnership Agreement and it was now being reviewed and changed.

145/23 Item 6 – Chief Executive’s Business

145/23.1 The Chief Executive noted that his Report had already been circulated to members in advance of the meeting but that he wished to highlight the launch of primary HPV testing. He said that this will make a huge difference to women’s lives. He added that there has been a lot of pressure to get this implemented and he congratulated all those involved, but he said that there is still a lot of work to be done.

145/23.2 The Chief Executive reported that a formal offer has been made to an individual for the role of Director of Finance and Corporate Services and he anticipated that the individual will take up the role. He said that he wished to recognise the work of Mr Stephen Wilson who has been acting up in the role of Director of Operations over the last number of years.

- 145/23.3 Ms Henderson asked for an update on the implementation of the Reshape and Refresh programme. The Chief Executive replied that the final Programme Board meeting is taking place on Friday and there will then be a full session with the PHA Board in January. Ms McCaig noted that she was due to bring an update to members on the costs for EY and she would do that for January following the conclusion of their work.
- 145/23.4 Mr Clayton returned to the matter of primary HPV testing and said that he was glad to hear that there have been no issues to date. He asked whether PHA or SPPG will be responsible for the recurrent costs. Dr McClean explained that PHA will fund the screening element and the laboratory costs, but SPPG is responsible for treatment costs.
- 145/23.5 The Chair asked if members were content with the format of the Chief Executive's Report. Ms Mann-Kler said that she would like to get more a sense of what challenges the Agency is facing and where it is meeting resistance. The Chief Executive said that he would consider this and suggested that there could be a quarterly "state of the nation" update. Ms Henderson said that she found the update helpful as it gives a broad overview of what is happening.

146/23 Item 7 – Finance Report (PHA/01/12/23)

- 146/23.1 Ms McCaig presented the Finance Report for the period up to 31 October and reported that PHA is projected to have a year-end break-even position. She noted that the surplus within the management and administration budget has increased but this will be looked at in the context of the impact of the Reshape and Refresh work. She advised that the key risks have not changed and she will discuss the position with regard to saving later in her update.
- 146/23.2 Ms McCaig advised that there may be some movement in terms of the final year-end position given there has been a lower uptake on vaccinations but that position has not yet been fully worked through.
- 146/23.3 The Chair commented that there is a concern around the strain of flu that is circulating. Dr McClean advised that with regard to vaccines, the uptake of the flu vaccine is better than that for the COVID vaccine, but both are lower than last year which is disappointing given the flu vaccine does help prevent hospital admissions. She reported that early indications are that the flu season has now commenced and PHA will be advising the Department of this. She said that the type of flu is the H3 strain which can lead to more severe illness.
- 146/23.4 Ms Henderson asked who is eligible for the flu vaccine and Dr McClean explained that at the moment it is eligible to those over 65, but lowering that is one of the options being considered. Ms Mann-Kler asked about uptake in care homes as it is easier to get those individuals vaccinated. Dr McClean reported that the uptake in care homes has been good, but it has fallen in other groups. She said that there is an efficient process

in place with community pharmacies carrying out the vaccinations. Ms Mann-Kler asked if the reduction in uptake is across all 4 UK nations, and Dr McClean confirmed that it is. Ms Mann-Kler suggested that there may be an element of vaccine fatigue.

146/23.5 Ms McCaig updated members on the outstanding monies owed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) to PHA and advised that €423k should be paid before Christmas. The Chair said that public sector bodies should seek to avail of opportunities for additional funding and that PHA should explore any funding for which it is eligible, for example it could partner with a charity organisation to run a campaign. Mr Stewart noted that previously if a public sector organisation sought additional funding, then the Department of Finance could in turn reduce the funding it gives. The Chair acknowledged that there is that risk. Ms McCaig advised that PHA has done some co-operative work with PEACEPLUS.

146/23.6 Ms McCaig reported that PHA has received correspondence which the Department has sent to all ALBs regarding savings for 2024/25. She explained that organisations have been asked to respond by 12 January modelling scenarios for flat cash as well as setting out what the impacts would be of budget reductions of 2%, 5% and 10%. She said that if the opening position was “flat cash”, the overall health deficit would open with a significant deficit and that all ALBs and SPPG are being asked to consider what savings/efficiencies could be made to support the financial position. She advised that there is a tight timeframe to respond so PHA will look at a high-level response which outlines impact, risk, challenges and those which may require an equality impact assessment and a rural needs assessment. She said that each Director will be asked to contribute to the response and that any of these scenarios will present a huge challenge to the PHA. She added that choices may have to be made around prioritisation. Mr Stewart commented that any potential reduction of services may require a Ministerial decision. Ms McCaig agreed and said that in the absence of a Minister, it would be for the Permanent Secretary to determine within the NIEFA.

146/23.7 Ms Henderson asked what would happen in the event of there being slippage in the vaccine budget. Ms McCaig said that it would likely be offered back to the Department to support the central position. The Chief Executive noted that while the Permanent Secretary indicated that the Department would welcome any slippage, it would be PHA’s preference to see individuals receive a vaccination.

146/23.8 Mr Clayton noted that previously any savings initiatives identified by PHA were rated as to whether they would be low, medium or high impact and that the Board had an opportunity to review that. He suggested that on this occasion those areas that were previously rated low or medium would likely be now rated as high, due to the recurrent nature of the savings, and therefore an Equality Impact Assessment will be required. He added that in any discussions with the Permanent

Secretary, it would have to highlighted that if PHA does not deliver on particular functions, there will be an impact on public health. The Chair said that this will be a challenge for PHA and when the first draft of the response is prepared, the Board will need to be upfront and ensure that it contains the right wording.

At this point Professor Rooney left the meeting.

146/23.9 Ms Mann-Kler asked if there is much discussion with the Chief Executives of other ALBs. The Chief Executive replied that this is an item on the agenda of weekly meetings that he joins with the Trust Chief Executives. He added that while PHA is in a break-even position, the Trusts are facing significant deficits. He noted that one of the outcomes of the COVID Inquiry may be that needs to be more investment in public health so therefore it is counter intuitive to remove funding from the PHA. He added that the political situation may also have an impact.

146/23.10 Ms Mann-Kler asked how the need to make savings will impact on the change towards an Integrated Care System (ICS). Ms McCaig explained that the Area Integrated Programme Boards (AIPBs) are at an early stage of implementation and do not have budgets.

146/23.11 Ms McCaig advised that Trusts have not been asked to develop savings scenarios as they have a different challenge in that they need to break even as next year they could have significant opening deficits.

146/23.12 Ms McCaig said that work will begin on the savings plan and information will be shared with members when it becomes available.

146/23.13 The Board noted the Finance Report.

147/23 Item 8 – Any Other Business

147/23.1 There was no other business.

148/23 Item 9 – Details of Next Meeting

Thursday 18 January 2024 at 1.30pm

Fifth Floor Meeting Room, 12/22 Linenhall Street, Belfast

Signed by Chair:



Date: 30 January 2024

