

Minutes of ninety-third meeting of the Board of the Public Appointments Service held remotely by Zoom, at 2.00pm on 22nd April 2021

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

Apologies: Ms. Anne O’Connor.

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 (and the supporting papers), which were circulated in advance of the meeting.

The CEO updated the Board on a number of key areas.

The CEO discussed the PAS Super 8 Performance Report, pointing out that Recruitment Service Delivery is now “amber”. It was noted that the Management Board had reviewed the Report and discussed areas of concern. These included the percentage of Senior Executive, State Boards, Professional and Technical and Local Authority competitions completed within target; it also included the percentage of General Grade Assignments made outside the target.

The CEO informed the Board that 1,421 roles were filled in quarter one, with PAS unable to fill five roles for clients.

The Board noted that the Management Board review of the dashboard had identified delays both within, and outside of, PAS control. The main delays outside of PAS control included: the Christmas period where PAS did not convene shortlisting or interviews for two weeks; the postponement of a competition for a number of weeks to accommodate a candidate who had Covid; issues with selection panel availability (delays in providing a client nominee accounted for 40% of State Board competitions being delayed and also accounted for delays on the professional & technical and local authority side). It was noted that clients are often limited as to who they can nominate in terms of expertise for some of these campaigns. On the local authority side, there were a number of campaigns advertised at the beginning 2020 which had then been delayed by the clients; overall 80% of delays with local authority competitions were due to the client; it was noted that PAS has been engaging closely with the Department of Housing, the CCMA, and the LGMA in an effort to bring efficiencies to the processes PAS are running on their behalf

In relation to delays within PAS control, it was noted that both professional & technical and local authority recruitment include quite diverse competitions ranging from ‘small’ competitions of two stages that attract small numbers, to more complex competitions which attract large volumes of applications, for multiple locations and include several assessment

stages. At present these still have the same targets in relation to timescales, but it was acknowledged that PAS is moving to a situation where performance reporting will reflect the timelines agreed with clients for each competition taking into consideration the complexity of the process required. It was also noted that some of the delays are due to capacity issues on the PAS side. It was noted that there were also delays in constituting boards due to failure to source Selection Board Members (other than Client nominees) occurring for professional & technical and local authority selection boards. It was noted that the Board Member unit has undertaken significant work over the last few months to develop pools of trained board members and PAS Representatives to ensure that the board programme is sufficiently supported.

The CEO also explained that although the demand led recruitment model for larger volume competitions can provide some efficiencies and results in a more favourable outcome for both clients and candidates; this approach can mean a longer time frame between request and candidate assignment. It was noted that the data shows a significant variance between performances against KPIs for the different grades and that a further examination of the demand led approach will be carried out to understand the impact on each competition.

The Board acknowledged the importance of having this report in order to be able to put a spotlight on potential issues and to learn from these. It was noted that time to recruit will require careful monitoring and ongoing engagement.

The CEO updated the Board on the Client and Candidate Experience elements of the Report. It was noted that the client survey was framed as the client survey for 2020 (it was issued on 4th of February); the questions referenced the previous 12 months. The Board noted that the candidate survey covered applicants who applied for competitions advertised in 2020 who agreed to participate in the survey (it was based on a sampling approach across different types of competitions). The upcoming Management Board session to explore all feedback from these surveys was noted, as was the plans to move to a more iterative approach to surveying and creating a structure around timely feedback. In addition to this pilot customer engagement tool, it was noted that PAS is engaging consultancy expertise to ensure the customer voice is heard and considered as a significant part of Project Nova. It was noted that the current client feedback would suggest that the quality of candidates is good but that timeliness is a challenge, and existing approaches to root cause analysis will be used to review this area.

The Board welcomed plans to further analyse all of this survey data going forward in terms of trends, including increasing diversity of appointments. It was also agreed that further engagement and dialogue is needed across the public service in relation to the extent and type of specialist recruitment needed, with a greater focus on areas such as skills mapping, including examining the different blends of skills required. It was agreed that skills are required beyond the traditional skills, with a focus on areas such as operational management and data analytics. The upcoming PAS review of the competencies for all general service grades was welcomed, as it should provide an opportunity to advance the discussion in relation to the range of specialist and management skills required. It was agreed that this would be discussed further in the Board strategy session in September.

The Board agreed that the Report indicated that the areas of People and Culture and Corporate Governance continued to be strong.

The CEO discussed the recent ED&I-themed client event, 'Recruitment and On-boarding in the Public Service' which was held on 23rd March, noting that the event also marked the formal launch, by Minister Michael McGrath, of the PAS ED&I Strategy (2021-2023). The two-hour webinar, moderated by a member of the PAS Board, Anne-Marie Taylor, explored the theme of inclusive recruitment and employment across all sectors, and showcased

strategies and initiatives that can help organisations move towards delivering an inclusive public service reflective of the communities it serves. The very positive feedback received from across the civil and public service was welcomed by the Board. It was noted that the PAS client base also demonstrated very strong support for continuing with practical, insightful events such as this, and respondents also highlighted areas of interest which could be explored at future sessions.

The CEO informed the Board that the Project Board, established as part of the PAS ED&I Strategy governance and implementation infrastructure (and which will be chaired by Salome Mbugua, Commissioner for IHREC) will have its first meeting in mid-May.

The Board noted that PAS has provided a paper to Minister Michael McGrath on efforts and future plans to attract more diverse candidates to the public service. This paper outlined recent initiatives around attracting and retaining diverse candidate pools, including PAS outreach work, collaboration with DPER to expand eligibility criteria for general service recruitment, the review of provision of reasonable accommodations and candidate journey for people with disabilities and inclusive employment of OWL graduates. It was also noted that PAS attended the Joint Committee on issues affecting the Traveller Community earlier this week and that there had been positive media coverage.

The CEO provided an update on the building project, outlining that the tentative start date for the project is 4th May 2021; starting with air conditioning works on Floors 4 & 5 which have been condensed into an approx. 13-week programme from the original 18 weeks. It was noted that work is due to commence on the 3rd Floor on 24th May 2021; a new work programme is due to be circulated once the Government formally announce the return of commercial construction

Risk Management

The CEO updated the Board on the recent State Board case. The Board noted that the PAS process was conducted appropriately, guidelines were adhered to and recommendations were made in line with best practice, and that the third party provider provided a comprehensive verification check which was conducted on the information contained in the CV. It was noted that there was however, no prior notification from the Department in relation to the issue and no opportunity to input into the statement.

The Board discussed this area at some length and considered the mitigations in place by PAS. It was agreed that although it is important to manage the communication around all aspects of this type of issue, it may not be possible to prevent it occurring, as there are only certain checks PAS can, and should, conduct. It was agreed that this could be a potential issue in other areas of recruitment and that it is critical that PAS continues to keep up-to-date with legal thinking and best practice in this area, ensuring that any investigations are robust and proportionate.

The Board noted that management of reputational risks in general was reviewed at the recent Management Board meeting and a number of actions agreed which include training, awareness raising, engagement with SBLOs, and communication with potential candidates for all roles to reinforce the commitment to ED&I and non-discrimination, and in relation to confirming their suitability on a number of grounds. It was noted that the process has commenced to identify a provider / professional agency to provide a verification service and that PAS is reviewing and agreeing what specific checks are necessary and appropriate and will ensure that they are not discriminatory (including seeking professional, and legal opinion on this area).

The Board also discussed the potential reputational risk to PAS of clients not adhering to high standards in terms of ED&I. The CEO informed the Board that PAS is attempting to share best practice in this area through the HR Managers Network and by engaging with other organisations on their ED&I strategies.

Financial Position

It was noted that staff costs are running ahead of profile as at the end March, but these figures include some costs of additional staff taken on for the additional (Covid related) HSE recruitment work; funding will be recouped from the HSE but has not been transferred to PAS budget yet.

It was also noted that courier costs are expected to remain high throughout the year and additional resources have been allocated to cover these costs; costs for Advertising and Testing are higher than profiled at this stage in the year due to increased activity in Senior Management Recruitment, the costs also include Search Fees which will be re-couped from the Client later in the year.

It was noted that there has been no capital expenditure to date in 2021; DPER has confirmed that €200k capital carry forward will be available in 2021 in addition to the capital allocation of €1.8m.

Business Plan

The Board noted the 2021 Business Plan which had been circulated in advance. Rosemarie O'Mahony joined the meeting to provide an overview of the Plan. She outlined the clear alignment between the business planning framework and the Strategy. She discussed the key priorities for PAS, including the building project, digital transformation, modernising recruitment tools, the ED&I Strategy, and the development of a Recruitment Advisory Service. She also outlined the ongoing efforts to involve all stakeholders and focus on the delivery of recruitment excellence.

The Board welcomed the plans to move towards more outcome focused language now that the key KPIs have been identified and are being measured. The Board also welcomed the commitment to complete a mid-way review at the end of 2021. The Board requested an overall timeline for all projects and that progress be measured against those timelines to ensure accountability.

Key Strategic / Risk Area: Digital Transformation – the Digital Imperative

The Board noted the paper on this area which had been circulated in advance. Paul Page joined Rosemarie O'Mahony in the meeting to provide an overview of the Paper. It was noted that the pandemic had significantly increased digital adoption in the organisation but the ability to respond so quickly to the pandemic was due to the foundations which had been in place, as this allowed planning to be accelerated.

The Board noted the success of the Office365 Business Champions Group in the successful roll out of this project.

The Board agreed that the integration of the business and IT is very clear, and agreed that the paper was well presented and very clear. The Board discussed the future plans for this area and discussed the need to focus on addressing the impact of reduced social connection on staff and board members. The Board noted that wellbeing is a standing item on the

Management Board agenda, and that PAS is engaging with staff on an ongoing basis in relation to the wellbeing and L&D needs.

The Board discussed how customers would feed into Project Nova and how the customer voice would inform decisions made in relation to the options to be selected. They welcomed the focus on the customer voice and ensuring the system will have the capacity to integrate with other people related systems.

The Board acknowledged that this was a very useful paper and agreed that the organisational culture was clear from the paper and the discussion at the meeting. The Board agreed that the IT function in PAS has responded really well to the crisis and had ensured business could continue remotely in a secure environment, and that staff were supported at the same time.

Exploration of the approach to managing Large Volume Competitions

The Board noted the paper on this area which had been circulated in advance. Sandra Cairns and Aoife Lyons joined the meeting to provide an overview of the paper.

The paper was introduced and a number of key strategic questions were highlighted as requiring discussion before any changes would be made.

The Board agreed that it was an excellent, reflective paper which contained innovative suggestions. It was suggested that additional areas of focus might include consideration of returners and the role of flexible arrangements. The Board agreed that the paper provided a very good start for discussions and recognised that there would be merit in linking this to workforce planning, the provision of clear career paths, and meeting the expectations of customers. It was also agreed that it would be useful to obtain further data on the candidature in terms of internal/external, and various EDI related groups. It was noted that a number of the matters raised are outside of the control of PAS, but PAS could seek to influence the discussion.

It was agreed to continue to discuss the key strategic questions internally in PAS and to discuss it further at the Strategy session in September.

Update on Internal Audit

The draft minutes of the last Audit Committee meeting were noted.

Presentation of the Annual Report from the Audit Committee

Clare McGrath, Chair of the Audit Committee joined the meeting to present the 2020 Annual Report of the Audit Committee (which had been circulated in advance).

The challenging year faced by the Audit Committee in supporting PAS through its response to Covid was noted. The Board noted that the Committee had delivered the agreed work programme, despite initial delays. The importance of video and other technology in ensuring business continuity and health and safety was noted. The approach to risk was outlined, with deep dives at each meeting and robust questioning of management in relation to key risk areas. The importance of delivering on Project Nova and the Agresso upgrade Project, and ensuring no further delays with either, was noted. The Board noted that the IPA had conducted an independent review of the Internal Audit function, and the Committee

completed their own self-evaluation, and that actions from these will be implemented in 2021. It was noted that the Committee is still considering its role in relation to risk management (an action which was recommended in the IPA Report).

It was noted that there were varying levels of satisfaction with the quality, and outcomes, of the five internal audits conducted in 2020. The Audit Committee expressed some concerns in relation to how robust the ED&I and Standardisation Audits were. The Committee welcomed the fact that the audit programme is now back-on-track for 2021. The Board noted the response from the CEO to the Asset Management audit which is also on track with the final recommendations due to be implemented in 2021. It was noted that a representative from the C&AG had attended an Audit Committee meeting in 2020 and did not identify any areas of concern.

The Chair of the Audit Committee expressed her appreciation for the extensive work done by Committee Members in advance of meetings, and for their engagement at the meetings. She also thanked the executive for the good traction achieved in implementing audit recommendations.

The Board thanked the Audit Committee for their work during the year and the level of assurance they offer the Board, and acknowledged the comprehensive report received.

Report on Internal Controls

Catherine Dobbins outlined that the report (which was circulated in advance) was aimed at providing assurance in relation to the operation of the internal controls in place, particularly in light of the changes brought about in response to Covid. It was noted that all Principal Officers completed the Internal Control Questionnaire, in conjunction with their staff, and that IT and Finance Unit completed comprehensive questionnaires in related to the Covid response and the impact on IT and finance controls. No significant gaps or weaknesses were identified, but some suggestions were made for strengthening the controls in place. The Board agreed that the report offered assurance to the Accounting Officer and the Board and agreed that it was important for management to take the time to reflect on this area.

PAS Annual Report

The Board agreed to provide feedback on the draft report by 22nd May.

Board Evaluation Action Plan

The Board noted the updated Action Plan and agreed to discuss it in full at the next meeting, where they will meet without the Executive for one hour before the full meeting.

AOB

The Board noted the Client Newsletters which had been circulated and agreed they were a really good communication tool and very informative.

Next meeting

To be arranged for June.