

**CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSIONERS FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
SUMMARY RECORD OF BUSINESS MEETING
TUESDAY 26 APRIL 2022, 10.00AM
ERSKINE HOUSE, BELFAST**

ATTENDEES:

Commissioners

Deirdre Toner, Chairperson
Sinead Burns

Secretariat

Amanda Martin, Secretary
Joanne Wray, Deputy Secretary
Heather Caulfield
Jayne Logan

APOLOGIES:

Commissioner

Jim Scholes

INTRODUCTION AND PRE-MEETING BUSINESS

1. The Chairperson welcomed everyone to the meeting.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- 1a. A number of items of other business were raised for discussion after the agenda items had been covered.

**SUMMARY RECORD AND ACTION MATRIX OF JANUARY BUSINESS MEETING
(Paper 08/22)**

- 1b. Commissioners agreed the Summary Record and action points of the 18 & 20 January 2022 Business Meeting. The Secretary reviewed the matrix and confirmed that all actions were either completed or ongoing.

MATTERS ARISING AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

- 1c. No conflicts of interest were declared in relation to April's business meeting agenda and papers, nor any matters arising not already detailed on the agenda.

SECRETARY'S REPORT (Paper 09/22 and Annex A, B, C & D)

2. The Secretary presented the Secretary's Report and outlined the key outputs and activities in addition to routine and ongoing activities (key management information presented in Annex A, B, C & D) since the last business meeting on 18 & 20 January 2022 which included:

- Update on relocation of Offices to Erskine House, Belfast and disposal of remaining assets at Stormont House. The team were continuing with a hybrid working model and this was proving successful;
- Review of the Commissioners' Disability Action Plan 2018-2022 and commencement of public consultation for new Disability Action Plan 2022-2027;
- Review of Commissioners' Equality Scheme and preparation of updated Equality Scheme;
- Engagement with NICSHR (Recruitment and Selection Transformation Group) on Commissioners' role in furthering the delivery of Recommendation 3.4 of the NIAO Report;
- Engagement with NICSHR on issues relating to:
 - appointment of Permanent Secretaries;
 - high volume applications for SCS Recruitment Competitions;
 - the use of Annex 4 of NICSHR's Recruitment Policy and Procedures.
- Consideration and drafting of amendments to the Recruitment Code which have been screened to ensure they have no adverse effect on the promotion of equality;
- Consideration of formal request from NICSHR asking Commissioners to consider the DfC Pilot Jobstart Scheme and proposal to offer participants permanent positions at Administrative Officer grade at the end of their placement period. Consideration was also given to the parameters and legal requirements of public consultations;
- Engagement with the HOCS and representatives of the NICS Board in early 2022 and engaged with HOCS and Jill Minne on Government Programmes and Initiatives;
- Agreement of Audit plan 2022/23;
- Finalisation of amendments to Commissioners' Auditing for Improvement document and publication on website;
- Audit of several SCS Competitions under the Article 6 Approval process;
- Revision of protocol for engagement with NICSHR which is under consideration;
- Consideration of options for obtaining information on Agency Workers;
- Review of Article 6 Templates – Engagement with HR Connect and proposals circulated to Commissioners for consideration;
- Engagement with NIO Deputy Director and NIO Chief Operating Officers on a range of issues, particularly in relation to budgets, governance and relocation;
- Engagement with NIO generally on:
 - appointment of new Civil Service Commissioner (to replace Jim Scholes following the end of his tenure on 30 June 2022);
 - Review of NIO Framework Document;
 - Meeting with NIO Permanent Secretary and Commissioners on Commissioners' Sponsorship arrangements and concerns expressed by Commissioners in writing.

- Update, publication and distribution, as appropriate, of Commissioners' Code of Ethics Guidance Document (to coincide with the release of the revised Code of Ethics by the NICS);
- Completion and return of ALB Stewardship Statement to the NIO;
- Engagement with UK Civil Service Commission in early February 2022 on a range of issues, including the role of Commissioners on SCS Recruitment Panels for the UK Civil Service;
- Updating of key documents on the CSC website following relocation and change of address;
- Revision and updating of Fees and Expenses Policy and claim forms to reflect changes in how fees and expenses are paid and to ensure that NIAO governance and anti-fraud requirements are taken into consideration (See Item 4 below for additional information);
- Updating of Business Continuity/Emergency Response Plan to take into account new hybrid working arrangements and relocation of offices;

Action: Secretariat to ascertain if a public consultation regarding amendments to the Recruitment Code was required.

CORPORATE MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

2021/2022 Budget Report

3. As part of the year end reporting process the Secretary updated Commissioners on the budget position at the end of the 2021-22 financial year. The Secretariat advised that an overspend in relation to staff costs was attributed to regional pay awards, associated back payments and NICS bonuses payable to NICS employees. These amounts could not have been included in the budget estimates as they were not known at the time of budget setting. Despite these challenges the budget was within the 5% tolerance threshold.

Accommodation/Service Costs and Agreement with NIO for Erskine House

4. The Secretary provided details of accommodation and service changes for Erskine House. It was noted that this cost was calculated using a formula which took into account the number of staff members and expected use of the facilities. This charge included items such as rates, hard and soft facilities management and lifecycle costs.
5. Commissioners were provided a summary of the lease details in regards to termination of the office space by either party.
 - (i) The Commissioners agreed to provide 6 months' notice, in writing, should they intend to vacate the workspace;
 - (ii) The Commissioners noted that the NIO would provide 12 months' notice if the OCSC was to vacate the premises.

2021/22 Business Planning Documents

6. The Secretary reminded Commissioners that the quarterly business planning documents would be circulated to Commissioners following the meeting.
Actions: Secretariat to circulate business planning documents to Commissioners.
7. The Secretary reviewed the Risk Register with the Commissioners and highlighted changes to the status of several risks. The Commissioners discussed and endorsed the recommendations.
8. The Chair asked the Secretary to begin work on a business case to request funding to cover the appointment of a fourth Commissioner in the Autumn Supplementary Estimates process. An additional Commissioner would allow for additional time to be dedicated to benchmarking good practice and championing equality and diversity.
9. Commissioners were advised that all Learning & Development Plan targets and objectives had been achieved through the online training sessions.
Action: Secretariat to prepare a business case seeking additional funding.

Commissioners' Strategic Priorities 2020-2025

10. Commissioners were advised that the 2022/2023 Business Plan was available on the website. This document would continue to be reviewed at meetings to ensure its continued implementation.

Staffing Update

11. The Secretary provided an overview of the secondment arrangements within the team and Commissioners noted that the Secretary, DP (Audit) and EO had all been granted extensions to their secondments.
12. The Commissioners appreciated the impact the HM Treasury spending review of 2021 had on the OCSC budget and the resulting reduction in staff hours and associated workloads.

2021/22 Annual Report

13. The Secretary anticipated that the Annual Report would be published in September 2022 and invited Commissioners to identify any key themes, issues or changes they would like to see reflected in the Report.
Action: Secretariat to issue email to Commissioners inviting them to identify key themes for inclusion.

Recruitment and Selection Transformation Group – Review

14. The Secretary provided Commissioners with an overview of the ongoing work with NICSHR to progress relevant actions, increase pathways to employment in the NICS and make associated amendments to the Recruitment Code.

Recruitment Code

15. The Secretary reiterated the aspirations of the Commissioners to expand the range of pathways to employment within the NICS and their commitment to promote positive actions for equality and opportunities for people with disabilities. Details of draft amendments to the Code were reviewed and these were further discussed and noted by the Commissioners.

(Inward) Secondment Policy – Update

16. The Secretary referred to the previous discussions and amendments regarding the length of inward secondments and consecutive secondments. The Secretary continued by advising that NICSHR was currently drawing up guidance on the use of the NICS Secondment Policy after which it would be published by the NICS.

Apprenticeships

17. The Secretary and Commissioners discussed the correspondence between NICSHR and the OCSC regarding the wording of proposed paragraphs within the recruitment code. Commissioners advised they were content with the changes proposed by NICSHR in their entirety.

Action: Secretariat to respond to NICSHR with Commissioners comments.

Casework Update

18. The Secretary updated Commissioners on casework completed and ongoing over the last period. This included:

- two requests from NICSHR in relation to appointments or extensions under Regulation 3(a) of the Recruitment Code;
- one request to fill a post from an existing Merit List.

19. Commissioners suggested that casework information should be anonymised. .

Action: Secretariat to ensure future reports are anonymised accordingly.

Recruitment Code Related Complaints and Queries

20. Commissioners reviewed the table detailing the complaints and/or queries. It was agreed that this information should also be anonymised in future.

Action: Secretariat to ensure future reports are anonymised accordingly

Requests for Information

21. The Secretary reported that one Freedom of Information Request had been received and responded to within the statutory timeframe.

Equality and Disability Awareness Training

22. Following a short discussion it was agreed to postpone the above training, currently scheduled for 19 May 2022, until the new Commissioner was in post. It was suggested that, subject to diary availability, dates in September could be reviewed.

Action: Deputy Secretary to postpone training and reschedule for September.

Relocation/Office Accommodation Update

23. The Secretary provided an overview of arrangements in place to securely store documents offsite until the OCSC's Retention and Disposal Schedule has been laid before and approved by the NI Assembly.

24. The Chair took the opportunity to ask if the secure cabinet at their home could be collected as it was no longer required as information was now provided in a digital format.

Action: Secretary to make enquiries about the collection of the secure cabinet;

25. The Chair requested that a new group photograph be taken at Erskine House following the appointment of the new Commissioner.

Action: The Secretary agreed to arrange a photograph of the Commissioners in due course.

ALB Stewardship Statement

26. The Secretary referred to the Stewardship Statement and advised it had been completed and submitted to the NIO at the end of March 2022. The Commissioners were invited to note the statement which demonstrated good practice and the effective use of internal controls in relation to Staff Management, Financial Management, Strategy and Policy and Information Assurance and Data Handling.

Feedback on Secretariat Performance

27. The current performance review approach was discussed and alternative performance methods considered including less formal approaches. After consideration by the Commissioners it was agreed to retain the current method of evaluation, which was by a Review Questionnaire.

Recent and Future Meetings

28. Commissioners referred to the table of recent and future meetings.
29. It was agreed that a meeting be arranged with the First Commissioner, UK Civil Service Commission, Baroness Gisela Stuart in London. Further information regarding flight times and onward travel arrangements would be furnished when available.
30. After a brief discussion it was agreed that a number of meetings be rescheduled due to diary clashes, including the Business Meeting in September and the Business Planning Meeting in November, once the new Commissioner was in post.
Action: Arrange meetings and travel arrangements as discussed and reschedule meetings as identified above.

Harkin International Disability Employment Summit

31. Commissioners were invited to note that two places had been reserved at the above Summit being held on 7 and 8 June 2022 at Belfast International Conference Centre at the reduced rate of £125 per delegate.
32. Additional information on the programme and guest speakers was available via the following link: <https://eventfulbelfast.eventsair.com/harkinsummit2022>

AUDIT REPORT (Paper 10/22)

33. The Chairperson invited the DP Audit to present the Audit Report.

Outstanding work: 2020/21 Audit Plan

34. The DP referred to a desktop compliance review of competitions below SCS and advised that 10 of the 11 recommendations, following the review of competitions, had been accepted. Following this acceptance, NICS HR had confirmed, with the Secretariat, that these actions had now been implemented.
35. The remaining recommendation is still under consideration. The DP was hopeful that Commissioners could be provided with an update soon.

Progress against 2021/22 Audit Plan

36. The DP advised Commissioners that three Article 6 Compliance Audits had been carried out and completed templates forwarded to NICSHR in early March 2022.
37. The DP reported that the management response to the outcomes letter following the review of NICS processes for managing and monitoring the tenure of secondments had not yet been received. However, the correspondence received from NICSHR dated 31 March 2022, in relation to the new secondment policy, advised that NICSHR had taken into consideration Commissioners audit recommendations and that Commissioners would be kept up to date on specific actions when the revised secondment guidance was finalised.
38. Commissioners noted the Review of Auditing for Improvement document was completed and a copy was available on the OCSC website.

2022/23 Audit Plan

39. Commissioners noted that the draft Audit Plan for 2022/23 was now finalised.
40. The DP referred the Commissioners to the draft Terms of Reference (ToR) for audit of competitions below SCS for their consideration. It was agreed that, as Commissioners intended to include regular audits of competitions below SCS in their annual audit plans, standard terms of reference should be put in place. These ToR would remain effective for all audits of competitions below SCS, until such times as any amendments were required.
41. Consideration was given to how the results of the audits would be presented. It was agreed that there would be one overarching report which would identify themes and any recurring issues as well as detailing the results of individual audits.
Action: Secretariat to amend the draft TOR to reflect the agreed approach.
42. Commissioners noted the update on actions from the previous Audit and Engagement meeting and on the Audit Matrix.

FEES AND EXPENSES POLICY (Paper 11/22)

43. The DS provided the Commissioners with an overview of the Fees and Expenses policy and explained that several amendments were required due to changes in the way fees/expenses were paid and costs reclaimed. Commissioners noted that this review would also ensure the policy complied with the NIO governance and anti-fraud requirements.

CIVIL SERVICE LEARNING PLATFORM

44. The DS referred the Commissioners to the learning platform and provided a comprehensive overview of the modules that needed to be completed.

HOUSEKEEPING/AOB/REGISTER OF INTERESTS (Paper 12/22)

45. Commissioners were asked to forward their fees to ensure prompt payment of the same in a timely fashion.
46. Commissioners were advised that interviews had taken place for the post of new Commissioner and that shortlisted names were with the Secretary of State for consideration.
47. Commissioners were reminded to provide any updates to the Register of Interests in writing/by email to the Secretariat.

**Office of the Civil Service Commissioners
for Northern Ireland**