

Title of Meeting	120 th Meeting of the Public Health Agency Board
Date	19 March 2020 at 1.30pm
Venue	Meeting Rooms, Linum Chambers, Bedford Street, Belfast

Present

Mr Andrew Dougal	- Chair
Mrs Valerie Watts	- Interim Chief Executive
Mr Edmond McClean	- Interim Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Operations
Professor Hugo van Woerden	- Director of Public Health
Name Redacted	- Non-Executive Director
Name Redacted	- Non-Executive Director (<i>via telephone</i>)
Name Redacted	- Non-Executive Director (<i>via telephone</i>)
Name Redacted	- Non-Executive Director (<i>via telephone</i>)
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Name Redacted	- Non-Executive Director
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In Attendance

Mr Paul Cummings	- Director of Finance, HSCB
Name Redacted	- Secretariat
Name Redacted	- Boardroom Apprentice

Apologies

Mr Rodney Morton	- Director of Nursing and Allied Health Professionals
Dr Aideen Keaney	- Director of Quality Improvement
Ms Marie Roulston	- Director of Social Care and Children, HSCB

26/20 Item 1 – Welcome and Apologies

26/20.1	The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were noted from Mr Rodney Morton, Dr Aideen Keaney and Ms Marie Roulston.
26/20.2	The Chair said that on behalf of the Board, that he wished to convey his immense gratitude to PHA staff and to acknowledge the challenges which PHA staff are facing at this time and for the marvellous work they are doing on behalf of the health of the people of Northern Ireland.
26/20.3	The Interim Chief Executive advised that while some officers were not

present at the meeting, they were currently involved with work dealing with the COVID-19 situation.

27/20 Item 2 – Declaration of Interests

27/20.1 The Chair asked if anyone had interests to declare relevant to any items on the agenda. No interests were declared.

28/20 Item 3 – Minutes of previous meeting held on 20 February 2020

28/20.1 The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 20 February 2020, were approved as an accurate record of that meeting.

29/20 Item 4 – Matters Arising

29/20.1 There were no matters arising.

30/20 Item 5 – Chair’s Business

30/20.1 The Chair advised that he had no business in addition to the report he had circulated to members via e-mail.

31/20 Item 6 – Chief Executive’s Business

31/20.1 The Interim Chief Executive informed members that senior staff in both the HSCB and PHA now follow a daily routine of meetings. She said that the two organisations’ senior management teams meet at 8:30am each day. Furthermore, she said that there is a pre-SILVER meeting which takes place at 12:15pm in advance of the daily SILVER meeting at 12:45pm with HSC Trusts. GOLD meetings are also held on a daily basis.

31/20.2 The Interim Chief Executive said that she had attended the meeting chaired by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister where each of the Government departments had given an overview of the key issues affecting their areas. She said that she had met with the Permanent Secretary and had written to him to advise that as HSCB and PHA are concentrating on COVID-19 related work, business continuity plans have now been formally invoked. She highlighted in particular the increased workload of the communications team in dealing with the volume of media enquiries. She added that in the light of the Prime Minister’s recent guidance, steps will be taken to ensure that PHA complies with any advice.

32/20 Item 7 – Update on COVID-19

32/20.1 Professor van Woerden gave a presentation on COVID-19. He began by outlining the typical models of a pandemic and what could happen in the event of an intervention. He explained that we have now moved from the “contain” phase to the “delay” phase and that during this phase,

- there will be an increased emphasis on surveillance.
- 32/20.2 Professor van Woerden said that it has been a challenge preparing for this pandemic as this is a new type of virus. He said that the Department of Health will be publishing detailed plans in due course. He gave an overview of the assumed epidemiology and the estimates of how many people in Northern Ireland may become infected. He emphasised the possibility of a second curve or peak in the incidence of the virus.
- 32/20.3 Professor van Woerden gave members an overview of the structure in place showing the links between Trusts, the PHA and HSCB, and the Department of Health in terms of reporting and outlined the daily rhythm of meetings that takes place. Going forward, he said that there should be an increased emphasis on communication, with the whole system working together, and society as a whole playing its part. He added that the approach being taken to deal with the outbreak will need to be regularly revised and improved and it will be crucial to monitor the psychological impact and maximise resilience.
- 32/20.4 The Chair thanked Professor van Woerden for his comprehensive presentation. He asked for more information about testing, particularly in view of the emphatic and repeated calls by the World Health Organisation on the importance of comprehensive testing. Professor van Woerden said that efforts are being made to increase the capacity for testing so that up to 1,000 tests can be conducted daily. He explained that presently, only the Belfast Trust can undertake tests. The Interim Chief Executive said that HSCB/PHA has been given offers of support across a range of areas and that these are being considered.
- 32/20.5 Mr McClean noted that Professor van Woerden had stressed the importance of communication. He said that PHA's messaging arrangements are integrated with those of the Department of Health, but added that there is an increased burden on public staff whose time is being requested to carry out media commitments on a daily basis. He added that the content of the message is changing and there will be a ramping up of television advertisements.
- 32/20.6 **Name Redacted** thanked the staff for their work so far. He sought clarity on the low number of tests carried out to date, and asked about whether nurseries would be closing. He also asked what stage of the pandemic Northern Ireland is currently in. Professor van Woerden said that BSO is attempting to scale up the number of tests, but that there are issues with lab capacity and that for clinical governance reasons, tests have to go through a validation process before they can be used. With regard to guidance, he noted that guidance can change very quickly. He said that Northern Ireland is roughly at the same stage as Wales and Scotland, but slightly behind the Republic of Ireland.
- 32/20.7 **Name Redacted** noted that there has been a lot of press attention on PPE

and sought assurance on progress. She asked whether there is the support in place should staff revert to home working. She expressed concern about the different approaches being taken on each side of the Irish border. Mr Cummings said that at the moment, the number of concurrent users for remote working is capped because of limited IT capacity, but it is hoped to increase this shortly. Professor van Woerden assured members that BSO is working as hard as it can to secure the required equipment.

32/20.8 **NR** asked about the impact on staff as well as the economic impact and impact on the nation's public health in the longer term. Professor van Woerden noted that as a result of the 2008 economic downturn there was an effect on life expectancy, particular those in the lower socio-economic classes. He said that it is important that efforts are made to dealing with this pandemic in the short term. Mr Stewart asked how far away we are from the peak. Professor van Woerden suggested that by not taking any measures, it may be another 4 weeks, but measures could be taken to delay this, but it would take 2 weeks to know if the measures were making a difference.

32/20.9 **NR** asked whether HSCB/PHA was giving consideration to the management of the aftermath. Professor van Woerden said that Brendan Bonner's team has been working on this. He noted that in Northern Ireland there are strong links with the community and voluntary sector. Mr McClean said that it is important to be mindful of the pressure with that sector. The Chair asked if the Chief Medical Officer had met with the community and voluntary sector. Professor van Woerden confirmed that a meeting had taken place where their role was recognised and that the Chief Medical Officer will use that sector as a vehicle for communication.

32/20.10 The Chair asked about communication with the lower socio-economic groups. Professor van Woerden acknowledged that more could be done. Mr McClean said that PHA is conscious that there will be different levels of understanding between urban and rural communities. He said that PHA will be aiming to keep its messages simple and to repeat the same message time and time again. Professor van Woerden said that the key message is the "Catch it. Bin it. Kill it". The Chair commended the tremendous work of the communications staff. He also highlighted the tireless work of public health staff in participating in a huge number of media interviews in order to keep the Northern Ireland public properly informed.

32/20.11 **Name Redacted** asked about working with universities to tap into any knowledge or intelligence they are building. Professor van Woerden explained that there is a Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) which draws expertise from across the UK, including Northern Ireland, but he added that he is keen to expand the scientific advice within PHA and that a meeting is taking place this afternoon regarding this. He said that it is important that the 4 Chief Medical Officers are

- working together and for PHA, it is important that any messages being given out do not underline the core message.
- 32/20.12 **Name Redacted** said that PHA's key message should highlight physical distancing and maintaining social connections. She asked about the aftermath of the pandemic from a mental health perspective. Professor van Woerden said that **Name Redacted** and his team are looking at this. **Name Redacted** said that the task facing the HSC is enormous and that every member of staff is working above and beyond their normal workload but this pandemic may run until July.
- 32/20.13 **Name Redacted** said that this is a time when the community sector will be needed, but it is becoming depleted. He agreed with the point made by **Name Redacted** about the impact of this situation on people's mental health, as people risk becoming more isolated and more vulnerable. Mr McClean assured members that PHA is closely monitoring contracts with external organisations whose contracts are due for renewal. He added that the PHA will work to guarantee that there is flexibility to ensure stability and continuity at this time.
- 32/20.14 The Interim Chief Executive expressed the view of the Chief Medical Officer that this work is now the full time work for the PHA. The Chair asked about the number of ventilators. **Name Redacted** advised that a business case has been approved, but it may take up to 10 weeks for the equipment to arrive. Mr McClean said that although PHA is being asked to undertake quicker procurements it is important that it is mindful of its governance requirements. Mr Stewart agreed that a record of all such exercises needs to be kept.
- 32/20.15 **Name Redacted** thanked all of the staff for their work to date and thanked the Interim Chief Executive for her decision to delay her retirement. She asked that from a governance point of view, if there could be more regular updates for PHA Board members, perhaps a weekly meeting. The Interim Chief Executive said that from this point on it will be important to keep members informed in the absence of having formal Board meetings.
- 32/20.16 **Name Redacted** noted that PHA is a small organisation and asked if there are mechanisms in place in the event of staff falling ill. He also asked about PHA making payments in advance to community and voluntary sector organisations to assist them. **Name Redacted** said that PHA pays contracts in advance as long as it satisfied that the required governance arrangements are in place. Professor van Woerden said that there are daily senior management team meetings at 8:30am where the Directors are monitoring business continuity arrangements. He added that PHA is encouraging staff to work from home where possible.
- 32/20.17 Professor van Woerden said that PHA is becoming increasingly aware of fragilities within the HSC system with single-handed GP surgeries closing and increased pressure on pharmacists.

32/20.18 **NR** shared the concerns of other members, but said that he had particular concerns in relation to social care, and specifically ensuring that low paid domiciliary care workers have the right equipment. He expressed concern that workers may have symptoms, but continue to go to work in order to earn a living. Professor van Woerden acknowledged that there are challenges and said that under the HSC SILVER structure, there are various cells which are looking at a range of issues, including provision of equipment. **Name Redacted** said that he was hopeful that the challenges around the supply of PPE would be resolved.

32/20.19 The Board noted the update on COVID-19.

33/20 Item 8 – Finance Report (PHA/01/03/20)

33/20.1 The Finance Report was noted by members.

34/20 Item 9 – Update from Chair of Governance and Audit Committee (PHA/02/03/20)

34/20.1 Members noted the minutes of the Governance and Audit Committee from the meeting held on 9 December 2019.

35/20 Item 10 – Updated PHA Equality and Disability Action Plans 2020-22 (PHA/03/03/20)

35/20.1 The Board **APPROVED** the updated PHA Equality and Disability Action Plans 2020-22.

36/20 Item 11 - HSC R&D Division Annual Report (PHA/04/03/20)

36/20.1 The HSC Research and Development Division Annual Report was noted by members.

37/20 Item 12 – Any Other Business

37/20.1 There was no other business.

38/20 Item 13 – Details of Next Meeting

Thursday 23 April 2020 at 1:30pm

Meeting Rooms, Linum Chambers, Bedford Street, Belfast, BT2 7ES

Signed by Chair:

Personal Data

Date: 23 April 2020