

Title of Meeting	121 st Meeting of the Public Health Agency Board
Date	23 April 2020 at 1.30pm
Venue	Fifth Floor Meeting Room, 12/22 Linenhall Street, Belfast

Present

Mr A NR	- Chair (<i>via video link</i>)
Mrs Olive MacLeod	- Interim Chief Executive
Mr Edmond McClean	- Interim Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Operations
Mr Rodney Morton	- Director of Nursing and Allied Health Professionals (<i>via video link</i>)
Professor Hugo van Woerden	- Director of Public Health
Name Redacted	- Non-Executive Director (<i>via video link</i>)
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In Attendance

Dr Aideen Keaney	- Director of Quality Improvement
Mr Paul Cummings	- Director of Finance, HSCB
Ms Marie Roulston	- Director of Social Care and Children, HSCB (<i>via video link</i>)
Name Redacted	- Boardroom Apprentice (<i>via telephone link</i>)
Name Redacted	- Secretariat

Apologies

None

39/20 Item 1 – Welcome and Apologies

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| 39/20.1 | The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. There were no apologies. |
| 39/20.2 | The Chair proposed that Item 8 was moved up the agenda as Professor van Woerden had another meeting to attend. |

40/20	Item 2 – Declaration of Interests
40/20.1	The Chair asked if anyone had interests to declare relevant to any items on the agenda. No interests were declared.
41/20	Item 3 – Minutes of previous meetings
41/20.1	The minutes of the Board meeting held on 19 March 2020, were approved as an accurate record of that meeting.
41/20.2	The minutes of the extraordinary meeting held on 10 April 2020 were approved as an accurate record of that meeting.
41/20.3	Alderman Ashe asked that it be placed on record his appreciation that queries raised by members had been responded to by officers outside of the Board meeting.
42/20	Item 4 – Matters Arising
42/20.1	There were no matters arising.
43/20	Item 8 – Update on COVID-19: Duties specific to PHA
43/20.1	Professor van Woerden began by giving members a short update presentation. He highlighted a graph showing that Northern Ireland's death rate is much lower than other countries, and he showed how the number of admissions to hospitals and the occupancy rates of ICU beds are beginning to decrease. He informed members that a contact management programme has been initiated. He finished by noting the increase in the number of care homes where there has been an outbreak.
43/20.2	The Chair asked about the current testing strategy, and in particular antigen testing. Professor van Woerden advised that the current antigen test is not specific or reliable. In response to a question regarding random sampling, he said that Northern Ireland is working towards this, but due to a range of methodological issues, it may take up to 8 weeks before this is fully operational. Name Redacted asked about maximising testing for HSC staff. Professor van Woerden advised that there is currently no staff waiting to be tested. In terms of wider testing of the Northern Ireland population, he said that wider scale testing is being ramped up so that each individual diagnosed with COVID-19 would be tested, as well as their contacts resulting in thousands of tests being carried out. The Chair noted that if Northern Ireland were to carry out a proportionate volume of testing to that in England, this would equate to 3,300 tests per day.
43/20.3	NR asked about testing in care homes. He noted that the number of outbreaks in care homes is increasing and asked what approaches were being considered to step up testing. Professor van

- Woerden acknowledged that there is huge pressure on staff who work in these facilities, and that they are at higher risk, but he assured members that there is extensive testing, with options being looked at such as mobile testing, or testing being carried out by community nurses or GPs going to individual's homes. **NR** asked about the potential collaborative working with the Republic of Ireland. Professor van Woerden said that there have been discussions, particularly about antibody testing.
- 43/20.4 **NR** asked about staff in care homes who may be self-isolating, as this may require homes to upscale. Professor van Woerden said that each Trust would have a resilience plan in place.
- 43/20.5 **NR** asked if staff are reluctant to work in care homes if there is an outbreak. He also asked about the testing strategy and why there was a change from the earlier contact tracing approach. Professor van Woerden noted that there had been significant media interest in the area of contact tracing, but he said that Northern Ireland's approach had worked well to date. In relation to care homes, he said that all homes will have an outbreak plan, and that there is support being provided to the homes by the Health Protection team in PHA. He explained that the approach used would see individuals who are at higher risk being shielded with reduced access to visitors. He acknowledged that there is likely to be an increase in the number of care homes affected.
- 43/20.6 Professor **NR** noted that care homes have their own plans, but she asked whether these have been developed based on advice from PHA, and has PHA given specific advice in relation to how admissions should be managed. Professor van Woerden said that PHA would assist homes, and added that patients are being tested prior to admission. Mr Morton explained that all homes will have an infection prevention control manual, which they would be expected to implement, and that PHA would provide guidance. Professor Rooney said that she would be concerned as whether PHA had a statutory responsibility in this area. The Interim Chief Executive advised that there are standards, and that these would be inspected and monitored by RQIA. She clarified that it is the responsibility of the homes to have a plan, and PHA's role is to support them. Mr Morton said that, alongside HSCB, PHA is working on three key strategies – prevention, mitigation and service continuity. Ms **NR** added that there had been a very useful workshop on this area held on Monday with a further meeting taking place tomorrow.
- 43/20.7 **NR** asked about PPE for care home staff, and PHA's guidance in this area. Mr Morton explained that Trusts are supplying care homes with PPE, but he acknowledged that stock levels are under severe pressure. He added that the Department of Health has asked him to look at reprocessing, recycling and reuse of PPE in the context of PHE guidance, but he stated that both the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Nursing Officer are clear that the policy in Northern Ireland is that PPE should not be re-used. He advised that the group that he is part of

- will consider the circumstances under which such a decision could be taken. **NR** asked what those circumstances would be, and a timeline for when this may be the case. Mr Morton said that the current strategy is focused on ensuring that there is sufficient PPE, and that any change in this strategy would be based within the context of best practice and evidence. He advised that visors can be decontaminated and reused. He added that a timeline would be predicated on how long the current stocks last.
- 43/20.8 When asked about the resilience and wellbeing of PHA staff, the Interim Chief Executive advised that the senior staff have been working hard since January on this crisis and that there was discussion this morning regarding the need to put in rotas for 5-day working out of 7 days and for ensuring that there are deputy arrangements in place so that senior staff can have time off without being interrupted. She added that this will be necessary given that this type of working is likely to continue for the next 18 months/2 years.
- 43/20.9 **Name Redacted** said that she is deeply concerned about the workload, and she expressed her thanks to the Executive Directors for the work they have done so far. She acknowledged their input to the Health Committee session last week, and asked if there was anything the Board could do. The Interim Chief Executive thanked **Name Redacted** for acknowledging the workload, and said that as a team the Directors are working well together, but a robust plan is needed to ensure that they can take their leave.
- 43/20.10 **Name Redacted** said that a regional wellbeing framework has been produced and asked whether PHA is ensuring that its staff can avail of this. Ms Roulston advised that Ms Michelle Tennyson has been involved in work to support the resilience of staff in both HSCB and PHA.
- 43/20.11 The Interim Chief Executive said that there is a challenge for PHA in terms of the data that is being produced on a daily basis and dealing with queries from the Minister, his Special Advisor and the Permanent Secretary on a daily basis. Mr McClean said that the increased scrutiny of both HSCB and PHA is proving challenging to the resilience of staff. Mr Cummings added that at the moment there is a requirement to quickly turn around business cases.
- 43/20.12 Mr Cummings suggested that as the Directors of the PHA are also required to attend meeting of the HSCB Board, perhaps a joint briefing would be more beneficial. **NR** acknowledged that staff are becoming tired, but he felt that a joint briefing with HSCB Board members would not be appropriate given the different statutory remits. He also expressed concern about the pressure to produce business cases at speed and sought assurance that the PHA had a proper paper trail in place to know who authorised these. Mr Cummings assured members that the proper processes are being followed, but this was

- more of an issue for HSCB. **NR** responded saying that there should be clarity in terms of why certain decisions were made and who was involved. Mr Cummings said that HSCB and PHA ensures that for any decisions that require to be made, the proper people are in the room and that the two organisations continue to have joint senior management team meetings even though there are 2 Chairs and 2 Chief Executives. Mr McClean added that where required in the development of a proposal PHA professional staff will assist, and that boundaries will not get in the way.
- 43/20.13 The Chair asked about testing. Professor van Woerden reported that there is an advisory group which is chaired by Dr Brid Farrell, and that an operational planning document has been approved. The Chair asked when this group would report. Professor van Woerden said that the group reports directly to the Chief Medical Officer. The Chair asked about targets. Professor van Woerden advised that the group is covering a huge remit across Northern Ireland, looking at different types of tests and tests in different settings. He added that there is a research project ongoing in care homes and in the community to look at patterns of the disease, and there is also engagement with the private sector with organisations like Randox and Deloitte.
- 43/20.14 The Chair said that the public should be more aware of this work and he cited an article where Professor John Newton, testing czar, stated that there is currently no reliable antibody test on the market.
- 43/20.15 **NR** asked about the strategy on contact tracing, both at the present time, and post-lockdown. She said that she assumed that PHA was leading on this, and is making use of digital technologies and the MOU with the Republic of Ireland. Professor van Woerden said that this is a complex landscape and is led across the UK by central Government. He said that at the early stages of the pandemic, contact tracing was used extensively but a decision was taken not to continue this. However he added that PHA is starting to undertake tracing in the context of an outbreak to monitor the pattern of spread. He advised that a centre is being set up by Microsoft and that there is a group that has been established with a view to a pilot being initiated on 27 April.
- 43/20.16 **NR** asked if PHA is staffing the pilot, and if it has the capacity to do so. Professor van Woerden said that in the early stages it will be staffed internally, but in response to a query from the Chair, he added that in the longer term there will be inputs from environmental health officers as well as recently graduated nursing and medical students.
- NR** sought assurance that all the decisions that are currently being taken are clinically-led rather than political. Professor van Woerden assured members that the testing strategy being taken forward is the appropriate one.
- 43/20.17 The Chair asked about what health preconditions could be given to reducing lockdown restrictions. Professor van Woerden said that this

would be determined by central Government.

- 43/20.18 **NR** asked if PHA has sight of the latest post-lockdown public health strategy as this would be an area of particular concern. The Interim Chief Executive said that the Department of Health has already begun to plan for this, and will share its thinking with the PHA. Alderman Porter felt that from a mental health perspective and issues such as the opening of parks etc., that PHA would be involved in these discussions.
- 43/20.19 Ms Roulston said that, in terms of **NR** earlier comment regarding a regional framework for mental health resilience and support, there is a group being chaired by Dr Tony Stevens which will look at how HSC engages with the community and engages staff. Professor **NR** sought assurance that PHA is gathering intelligence from a range of sources to determine the regional picture, and whether people are presenting to services. Mr McClean advised that he had spoken to Mr Brendan Bonner regarding Lifeline and other community-based services, and that there is no discernible increase to the number of suicides. He added that post-pandemic, there will be an impact on the services that PHA commissions and it is something that PHA is anticipating. Professor van Woerden noted that there has been an increase in terms of the incidence of domestic violence, and a reduction in the number of safeguarding referrals. **NR** said that there has been an increase in the number of calls to Childline; **NR** said that post pandemic a major issue could be that of bereavement with families having been denied the opportunity to grieve in the traditional manner and enquired whether the Agency had plans to veer funds to support services or to bid from additional funding.
- 43/20.20 Alderman **NR** asked whether there was research being done to look at the impact that lockdown is having, and in particular where people may not want to leave their homes, and he asked what the tipping point is if lockdown is in place for too long. Professor van Woerden advised that Dr Janice Bailie, Research and Development Division, PHA, has set up a behavioural research group to look at some of these issues, and he added that the Chief Medical Officer has also expressed concern regarding the short, medium and long term impacts on mental health.
- 43/20.21 Mr McClean said that in relation to the point made by **NR** PHA is providing stability to its providers and giving them as much flexibility as possible during this pandemic phase. He said that Mr Brendan Bonner and his team are working on a post-pandemic response plan and that this will link with Making Life Better.
- 43/20.22 **NR** noted that at today's Health Committee update, the appointment of a Mental Health champion was announced, and that historically mental health is an area that has been under resourced and understaffed.

43/20.23	NR	said that communications are very important during this time, and she would welcome an update on the key messages that PHA will be promoting going forward and an assurance that these will reach all levels of the community. Mr McClean agreed that this could be an area which could be discussed in more detail at the next meeting as there is a large amount of work going on, and he agreed to share that with members.
44/20	Item 5 – Chair’s Business	
44/20.1		The Chair said that he had circulated his business in advance of the meeting. He asked whether there was a limit in terms of the number of COVID-19 tests that can be carried out per day. Professor van Woerden said there are ongoing efforts to scale up the number of tests being undertaken daily, but he assured members that there was no backlog of patients or staff waiting to be tested. In response to a question from the Chair, he stated that laboratory capacity was no longer an issue.
45/20	Item 6 – Chief Executive’s Business	
45/20.1		The Interim Chief Executive said that the work relating to COVID-19 is dominating the work of PHA staff, but there is a need to start to plan for when there is a return to normal business. She acknowledged that there have been challenges for PHA in terms of the surveillance data that is being produced, and she has made it clear what PHA’s responsibility is in this area. She stated that definitive data regarding deaths come from death certificates, and that there can be a delay of up to 5 days in this information becoming available. The Chair said that he did not see the benefit in generating these data on a daily basis, and that weekly data would be more meaningful. He also emphasised that the publication of daily statistics gives a daily opportunity for the press to publish stories which unnecessarily cause anxiety in the community, then when the weekly figures are finally produced they state that these are much greater than the statistics provided by PHA.
45/20.2	NR	noted that there are a lot of pressures falling on the Executive Directors and she asked whether this is continuing to accelerate, or are there signs that it is beginning to ease off. The Interim Chief Executive reiterated that the biggest issue remains the data, but that the Minister’s Special Advisor has been invited to a meeting so as he can obtain an oversight of what PHA’s role in this area is.
46/20	Item 7 – Governance in Emergency	
46/20.1		Mr McClean said that the correspondence received from the Department of Health confirmed that a number of regular year-end meetings were being stood down, but the timescales remain in place for the production of the Annual Report and Accounts for 2019/20, together with the Governance Statement. He suggested that this year’s PHA Annual

- Report may be a “lighter touch” Report. Mr Cummings said that he is currently working through the detail of this with the auditors, and in response to a question from **NR** he assured members that his team will ensure that an accurate set of accounts is produced that will be audited before being brought to the PHA Board.
- 46/20.2 Mr McClean moved on to discuss the PHA’s Business Continuity Plan, and he advised that this is reported on twice a week and regularly kept under review. He advised that there is a comprehensive system of reporting from all of the cells which support HSC Silver, and that this is also being kept under review. He added that thought is being given to what lies ahead as PHA’s day to day work still needs to be dealt with, and that this week the weekly Agency Management Team meetings have been reinstated.
- 46/20.3 **NR** noted the comment that PHA is having to adapt as things change, and he asked whether there is enough staff to deal with this, and if many staff are on sick leave or self-isolating. Mr McClean advised that PHA does have a number of staff who have underlying health conditions and a small number of staff who may need to be redeployed, but he said that the only area where PHA may require additional support is in the field of project management, but that support has been obtained through the Leadership Centre.
- 46/20.4 **NR** said that when there is the opportunity, she would welcome the reflections of the new Interim Chief Executive on how the current working arrangements with PHA and HSCB are working. Mrs MacLeod agreed to consider this.
- 46/20.5 Mr McClean explained that there is the need for PHA to ensure that it maintains a focus on “business as usual”, and considers all anticipated risks, for example ensuring that vaccination programmes are continuing, and that people still continue to attend emergency departments when required, and that safeguarding referrals are being made. He said that PHA is also mindful of its contracts with the community and voluntary sector, and giving those organisations a degree of flexibility, but ensuring that core activities are maintained.
- 46/20.6 The Chair recorded thanks to members for their participation. He particularly acknowledged the herculean demands being placed on the senior team during this extended period. He also asked that sincere thanks be conveyed from the Non-Executive Directors to all staff for their enduring commitment.
- 46/20.7 **NR** asked whether PHA is giving advice to Councils. Mr McClean explained that Mr Brendan Bonner has been linking with SOLACE. He said that there was a challenge for PHA in that it was being expected to make decisions across all sectors, instead of providing advice and guidance.

- 46/20.8 **NR** r noted that today's agenda focused solely on COVID-19, and whether there were any other reports that should continue to be brought to the Board. Mr Cummings said that the monthly Finance Reports will continue to be brought, but there would not have been a report brought to the April meeting in any case.
- 46/20.9 **NR** said that she did not feel that a monthly meeting was sufficient, and asked whether members could receive a weekly update or a short report, but without wishing to place additional demands on the Executive Directors. **NR** said that the Executive Directors should determine the frequency of any updates. **NR** said that he agreed with both members, but felt there should be an opportunity for Non-Executives to highlight any issues or concerns they have. It was agreed that Mr McClean and Mr Cummings would facilitate an update meeting, and that if other Executive Directors were available to contribute they could do so. **NR** suggested that any issues identified by Non-Executives should be sent in advance.
- 46/20.10 The Chair asked that Non-Executive Directors should e-mail him with any issues which they wished to be raised, or alternatively they could contact him by telephone. He undertook to then communicate with Executive Directors.

47/20 Item 9 – Any Other Business

- 47/20.1 There was no other business.

48/20 Item 10 – Details of Next Meeting

Thursday 21 May 2020 at 1:30pm

Fifth Floor Meeting Room, 12/22 Linenhall Street, Belfast, BT2 7ES

Signed by Chair:

Personal Data

Date: 21 May 2020