

Minutes of the Board Open Session meeting held on 18 June 2025 at Millbank Tower, London

CHAIR

Polly Curtis, Senior Independent Member

NON-EXECUTIVE MEMBERS

John Ainsworth

Anne Davies

Michael Parsons

Anu Singh

Amerdeep Somal, Ex Officio Member

Dave Thompson

EXECUTIVE MEMBERS

Rebecca Hilsenrath, Chief Executive Officer

Gill Kilpatrick, Chief Operating Officer

Karl Banister, Director, Operations, Legal and Clinical

IN ATTENDANCE

Paula Sussex , Incoming Ombudsman

Scott Stevenson, Director of Strategy

Maria Mansfeld, Chief of Staff

Barry Topham, Chief Digital and Transformation Officer

Roz Pedersen, Assistant Director, Finance

Hazel Waddington, Assistant Director, Transformation

Katy Connon, Assistant Director, People and Talent

Mohamed Mishal, Partner, Canvs (Board Effectiveness Review Consultant, item 18)

Andrew Dawson, Governance Officer (minutes)

OBSERVERS - INTERNAL

Faye Glover, Private Secretary

Kate Minton, External Communications Manager

Martin Deller, Assistant Director, Strategy and Public Affairs

Rhiannon Thomas, Caseworker/Governance Officer appointee

8. Chair's Introduction and Welcome

- 8.1 The Chair welcomed members and attendees to the meeting. In particular she welcomed Paula Sussex to her first meeting of the Board.
- 8.2 The Chair identified the focus of the meeting as items 15 (Long Term Strategy development), 16 (Removal of the MP Filter) and 18 (Board Effectiveness Review).

9. Declarations of Interest

- 9.1 No declarations of interest relevant to matters on the agenda were received.
- 9.2 John Ainsworth informed the Board that his interests had changed and that he would submit an update for the Register of Interests.

10. Minutes and Matters Arising from the meetings on 19 March 2025 and 27 May 2025

- 10.1 Members agreed the minutes as a true and accurate record.
- 10.2 Members noted that all matters arising are complete.

11. People , Equality, Diversity and Inclusion**11.1 People Update**

- 11.1.1 Members received a verbal overview of the report from the Assistant Director of People and Talent, including the below key points:
- The people metrics reported to the Board will be reviewed to ensure that they are providing an accurate and complete picture.
 - Work is continuing on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Areas of focus for the next 12 months are diversity in leadership, and maintaining knowledge of our diverse workforce.
 - Caseworker recruitment and onboarding had progressed. 47 new starters and 16 promoted colleagues had started in new roles since January.
- 11.1.2 Members noted the level of sickness absence and asked whether a breakdown by protected characteristics was available.
- Action: KC to provide demographic breakdown of sickness absence**
- 11.1.3 Members welcomed the successful recruitment campaign and asked for a breakdown by protected characteristic.
- Action: KC to provide demographic breakdown of caseworker recruitment.**
- 11.1.4 Members discussed the proposed Values and Behaviours Framework and asked whether it would be possible in due course to develop a set of metrics based on the framework.
- 11.1.5 Members asked if the People Report metrics could be expanded to include metrics around culture.

Action: KC to consider including culture metrics in People Report

11.2 Responding to the Staff Survey - Organisational Action Plan

- 11.2.1 Members received a verbal overview of the report from the Assistant Director of People and Talent.
- 11.2.2 Members discussed the Action Plan, commenting that most actions were owned by the Executive Team and Senior Leadership Team, whereas the management

tier were best placed to influence behaviours. Activities at management level were discussed and members noted that manager scores were relatively high.

- 11.2.3 Members commented that the information provided about the Staff Survey was at high level and it would be useful to have more detailed information.

Action: KC to provide detailed staff survey results and learning to the September Board meeting

12. Chief Executive's Report to the Board

- 12.1 Members received a report from the Chief Executive.
- 12.2 The Chief Executive welcomed Paula Sussex to the meeting and confirmed that the process to appoint her as Ombudsman was close to completion.
- 12.3 The Chief Executive informed the Board that the number of unallocated cases had risen to over 2,000, with a further queue of 300 at Intake. Members discussed the reasons for the increase, noting that increasing demand was an issue across the public sector.
- 12.4 The Board congratulated PHSO's 'Complaints Champions' team for their recent runner up award at the Ombudsman's Association conference.
- 12.5 Members discussed the impact of the Public Value Model. It was confirmed that operating at level 2 had had little adverse impact. The decision on whether to move to level 3 would be taken by the Executive Team in July.
- 12.6 Members noted the report.

13. Strategic Risk Report and Register

- 13.1 Members noted a verbal update of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee's considerations of strategic risk at the most recent meeting 12 February from the committee Chair Michael Parsons.
- 13.2 Members discussed the report and register and commented that the Public Value Model (PVM) was being treated as a risk mitigation rather than as a process which carried a degree of risk. It was confirmed that risks around PVM were tracked at directorate rather than strategic level.

Action: Risks relating to the operation of the PVM to be outlined in the September Strategic Risk Report

- 13.3 Members noted the report.

14. Performance

14.1 Business Plan and Strategy Delivery 2024-25

- 14.1.1 Members noted the report, with no comments.

14.2 Casework Performance Report 2024-25 P10

- 14.2.1 Members noted the report, with no comments.

14.3 Financial Management Report 2024-25 P10

14.3.1 Members noted the report, with no comments.

STRATEGY**15. Long Term Strategy Development**

15.1 Members received a report from the Director of Strategy setting out proposals to develop a strategy covering the period 2026-31.

15.2 The Board **agreed** the outline plans for the development of the long term strategy.

15.2 Members commented that the three strands of the proposed strategy are the right ones.

15.3 Members noted that a full consultation exercise was not planned, but that an engagement plan focussing on existing key stakeholders and networks will be developed.

15.4 Paula Sussex commented that she is broadly supportive of the proposed strategy, but that it needed to be taken forward gradually and that several areas required clarification or further development:

- The organisation should focus on systemic improvements; how to change to achieve that, and what to do with the insights gained.
- What does the Parliament and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee want from PHSO?
- Who are the key stakeholders for the strategy as a whole and for each element?
- How does PHSO align with other Ombudsman services?
- How to communicate the strategy to citizens?

15.5 Members commented that a fully considered data strategy was required, including what data is collected, analysed and used. Data analysis will inform much future decision-making.

16. Removal of the Mandatory MP Filter for Complaints about Government Departments and Agencies

16.1 Members received a paper from the Director of Strategy updating the Board on progress on seeking removal of the MP filter for complaints.

16.2 The Director confirmed that it was unlikely that the Government would support inclusion of provisions to remove the MP filter in the Hillsborough Law Bill.

16.3 The Board confirmed that they were still supportive of the policy to seek removal of the MP filter. However, they felt they needed better data about who complains to the Ombudsman, and evidence that complainants referred back to MPs do not come back.

- 16.5 Members discussed the option proposed in the paper of supporting an amendment to the Bill, and the possible reputational risks this might involve.
- 16.4 Paula Sussex commented that removal of the MP filter was one among a number of competing priorities, would be resource-intensive, and that she was concerned about the possible increase in demand if the filter is removed. It would be helpful to have further information about how the MP's postbox system worked and about actions taken to secure MP's support for PHSO's processes.
- 16.5 Members noted the report and asked for the matter to come back to the Bard later in the year.

Governance

17. Committee Updates

17.1 Audit and Risk Assurance Committee

- 17.1.1 Members noted the report, with no comments.

17.2 Strategic Delivery Committee

- 17.2.1 Members noted an update from the Committee Chair.
- 17.2.2 The Chair added a brief verbal update on his assessment of the work of the Committee following its first two meetings, and outlined the Committee's priorities going forward.

17.3 Remuneration and Nominations Committee

- 17.3.1 Members noted the report, with no comments.

18. Board Effectiveness Review, 2024/25

- 18.1 Members welcomed Mohamed Mishal to the meeting.
- 18.2 Members received a report from Mohamed Mishal of his review of the Board's effectiveness during 2024/25.
- 18.3 Members made the following points in discussion:
- 11.13 Board papers should focus on the key strategic issues and raise questions.
 - 11.14 Papers that were 'to note' should be avoided.
 - There had been some difficult and challenging discussions during the year, but in consequence the Board had got to a 'good place'.
 - 11.15 The suggestion to restrict attendees below director level and observers in order to promote open discussion had to be balanced with the need for transparency.
- 18.4 The Chief of Staff confirmed that she will discuss the report with the incoming Ombudsman. An action plan will be presented to the Board in September.

19. Annual Report Update

- 19.1 Members received a report from the Chief of Staff providing an update on the preparation of the Annual Report and Accounts for 2024/25.
- 19.2 The Chief of Staff informed the Board that the Governance Statement would need to be redrafted with Paula Sussex as the signatory. The National Audit Office had been advised of the change.
- 19.3 The Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee confirmed that the Committee had agreed to recommend the draft report and financial statements to the Board.
- 19.4 The Chair of the Remuneration and Nominations Committee confirmed that the Committee had agreed to recommend the Staffing Report to the Board.
- 19.5 The Board noted the draft Annual Report and Accounts; these will come to the Board for final approval on 4 July.

Other Business**20. Board Forward Plan**

- 20.1 Members suggested the following matters should be considered for inclusion on the forward plan:
- Systemics
 - Caseworker views
 - Complainant views
 - A 'deep dive' review of Digital
 - Data strategy
 - The incoming Ombudsman's views on the organisation, strategy, digital and transformation.
- 20.2 Members noted the forward plan.