

NI Community Relations Council
Finance and General Purposes Committee

31st March 2023

Held Online

1. **Present:** Mr M McDonald (Chair), Ms A Simpson (Board Member), Mr M McDonnell (Board Member), Ms N Tandon (Board Member)
2. **In Attendance:** Dr J Irwin (CEO), Ms J Adamson (HR Manager), Mr B McDonald (Vouching and Verification Officer), Mr P Garrity (Finance Manager), Ms U Kelly (DFAP Director), Ms H George (PA to CEO and Board).
3. **Apologies:** None

4. Minutes

The minutes of the 29th November 2022 Finance and General Purposes Committee meeting were reviewed and approved.

5. Matters Arising

The CEO updated the Committee on a number of actions which were discussed at the last meeting.

The Committee had asked for a review of the Agile Working Policy to take place. The CEO informed the Committee that this review would be taking place in 2023/24.

At the previous meeting the Committee discussed whether there would be any avenues for the Board to pursue providing an appreciation allowance/gift to staff members who have worked hard over the last year in the difficult circumstances of staff shortages. The CEO informed the Committee that the team reviewed the Managing Public Money Guidance and found that Annex A4.13 Special Payments sets out the procedure for appreciation payments. Any proposed payments would need to have the approval of the sponsoring department.

The Committee agreed that this issue should be discussed at a closed session at the upcoming Board meeting.

ACTION: Closed Session to be added to Board Meeting agenda, for members to discuss Special Payments guidance.

With regards the Board's discussion on their own attendance allowance and Chair's allowance, the Committee agreed that CRC should write to TEO to inform them that the allowance has seen no increase in the 3.5 years it has been in place.

ACTION: The CEO to write to TEO to ask if the Attendance Allowance and Chair's Allowance will receive an increase this year.

6. Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest were raised by the Committee.

7. CRC Quarterly Performance Report

The CEO presented the Committee with CRC's Quarter Three Performance Report, submitted to TEO in January 2023 following approval by the Chair. The Report sets out the risks registered at that time, the objectives achieved, the sick absence report for that period, and a financial update.

The Committee noted the report.

8. Finance Update

Mr P Garrity informed the Committee that TEO requires CRC to produce a draft Trial Balance by 28th April, to include within their own Annual Accounts as part of government's faster closure project. The Finance Team have been working to establish CRC's year end position, and to project the remaining 2022/23 grants to be vouched in quarter one 2023/24.

The Team is also working on establishing CRC's inescapable costs for 2023/24 and a draft budget for the year.

The CEO added that CRC had not yet received an opening budget from TEO for 2023/24, however Mr C Gardner provided CRC with authority to incur expenditure in the intervening period in line with existing business activity up to a value of the 2022/23 opening budget allocation, less 10%.

The CEO informed the Committee that it was the view of the previous Board that the grants should face no greater cut than the overall cut made on CRC in this case 10%. The Committee discussed how this cut would affect the grants. It was agreed that the Committee would recommend to the Board that, if the opening budget from TEO does include a 10% cut, then CRC would suspend the Media Grant and Publications Grant for the 2023/24 year. The Committee agreed that the Core Fund and North Belfast fund were the priority as they include salaries and the maintenance of Good Relations infrastructure. Pathfinder and CRCD grants may be affected.

The Committee thanked the Finance Team and CEO for this update.

9. Capital Grant Charge

Ms H George reminded the Committee of CRC's Capital Grant awards which were part of its European funding that ran in 2007-2009, these placed charges against properties funded by this grant.

Following the query raised by CRC in relation to lifting these charges, TEO Permanent Secretary informed CRC that these charges can now be released.

CRC has written to the groups who had raised a query about these charges to inform them of this decision, and will now write to all the other affected groups.

The Committee noted this update.

10. Vouching and Verification Procedures

Mr B McDonald presented the Committee with a paper setting out proposed changes to the Vouching and Verification Procedures.

It is recommended that the groups new to the funding schemes in 2023-24 would receive a full verification check. Those already in the scheme receiving multi-year funding will undergo a general financial verification process. This verification will ensure that any recommendations made in the previous year have been implemented.

Mr B McDonald also proposed that the vouching claim form used during the 2022/23 financial year continue to be used in 2023/24.

The Committee approved the recommendations and thanked Mr B McDonald for this report.

11. Vouching and Verification 2022/23 Update

Mr B McDonald updated the Committee on the vouching and verification process for 2022/23 grants.

There are 90 grants active which will be accrued into the new financial year, but still taken from the 2022/23 budget. These are mainly Core Fund and North Belfast Fund grants.

The 2021/22 grant of the group whose funding was suspended at TEO's request, can now be released for payment. This funding was suspended due to an investigation by TEO, however, during quarter four 2022/23 TEO informed CRC that the investigation had been completed and funding could be released to the group.

The Team project that all 2022/23 grants will be discharged in the first quarter of 2023/24.

The Committee thanked Mr B McDonald for this update.

12. Staffing Update

Ms J Adamson presented the Committee with a report setting out CRC's current staffing position.

CRC's new DFAP Director and temporary Finance Manager began work in March 2023. The Chair welcomed these new members of staff to today's meeting.

The CEO added that she was sad to report that CRC have received the resignation of the Director of the Funding Team today. Paul Jordan has worked at CRC for over 24 years but feels he would now like to try something new. His final day at CRC has not yet been confirmed. The Committee passed on their best wishes to Paul .

The Committee noted the report and thanked Ms J Adamson and the CEO for this update.

13. Sick Absence Report

Ms J Adamson presented the Committee with CRC's Sick Report for 2023/23.

She informed the Committee that there has been a significant decrease in sick leave in the final quarter of the year, due to a member of staff off on long term sick returning to work.

The Committee noted the paper.

14. Performance Development Review

Ms J Adamson reminded the Committee that during the Chair's Dignity at Work check-in staff members suggested that the Performance Development Review pro-forma should be reviewed and updated.

The HR Manager has drafted an updated version of the Performance Development Review pro-forma, which was circulated to staff and received positive feedback.

The Committee approved the revised PDR proforma. The agreed version will now go to the Union for consideration.

15. Annual Fair Employment Return

Ms J Adamson provided the Committee with CRC's Annual Fair Employment Return.

The report shows no cause for affirmative action at CRC.

The Committee approved the Return.

Ms J Adamson will now submit the Annual Fair Employment Return to ECNI.

16. Dignity at Work

Ms J Adamson presented the Committee with a paper updating on the implementation of CRC's Dignity at Work project.

The Chair suggested that he would take part in another check-in with staff in quarter two of 2023/24, and that reports to the Committee and Board will be reduced to once a year.

ACTION: Chair to meet with Staff Team for a Dignity at Work check in in quarter two 2023/24.

17. Health and Safety Update

Ms J Adamson updated members of a number of health and safety items.

CRC recently conducted a review of the needs of a staff member who returned from long term sick leave. It was recommended that a piece of equipment be purchased for this member of staff to assist with his work. CRC made this purchase, and the item has been installed at the staff members home to assist with home working.

The HR Manager undertook training and is now a qualified Mental Health First Aider. Ms J Adamson added that CRC staff can also avail of mental health support provided by Inspire.

The Committee welcomed this news and thanked Ms J Adamson for this update.

18. Premises Committee

Ms J Adamson informed the Committee that she regularly attends meetings of the Equality House Premises Committee.

At a recent meeting it was confirmed that all planned preventative maintenance work is up to date.

Portable Appliance Testing is being organised to take place in April and June 2023 for all office IT equipment and staff laptops.

In response to a query from a committee member the CEO updated on the 'Belfast Two' project, which had aimed to move all ALBs in Equality House into a building that is within the Government's portfolio. This project had been postponed and is now scheduled to take place in 2025. There has been no recent update on that timetable. Due to Agile working, CRC's needs have changed since the original assessment was completed and it is likely that a new review of premises requirements will be necessary.

The Committee thanked the CEO for this update.

19. Any Other Business

A Committee member asked whether CRC would be providing a response to the Government's Race Relations Consultation. The CEO stated that CRC no longer provides written responses to public consultations, as an ALB the organisation is able to take up issues directly with government departments but she would speak to the Engagement Team about providing TEO with any feedback or comments.

20. Date of Next Meeting

June 2023