

**MINUTES OF THE TWO HUNDRED AND FOURTY SEVENTH MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY  
RELATIONS COUNCIL BOARD HELD ON TUESDAY 28<sup>th</sup> JANUARY 2025 14:00  
ANTEROOM, EQUALITY HOUSE**

**4101/25 Present:** Mr M McDonald (Chair), Mr R Campbell, Mr J McCallister, Mr M McDonnell,

**4102/25 In Attendance:** Dr J Irwin (CEO), Mr P Day (Director of Engagement), Mr B McDonald (Director of Funding), Ms J Adamson (HR Manager), Ms H George (EA to CEO and Board)

**4103/25 Observers:** Mr C Gardner (TEO).

**4104/25 Apologies:** Ms S McClelland, Ms C Harris, Ms M Braniff, Ms N Tandon, Ms A Simpson, Mr P Garrity (Finance Manager).

**4105/25 Welcome**

The Chair welcomed members and staff to today's meeting.

He noted that the meeting is not quorate, and therefore any decisions that need to be made will be handled through written procedures after the meeting.

Some Board members had sent on their apologies ahead of the meeting and some had lingering affects of the recent storm which have prevented them from attending today.

**4106/25 Standard Checks**

No conflicts were raised and no gifts have been received

**4107/25 Matters Arising**

All matters arising will be updated as part of other agenda items.

**4108/25 Chair's Business**

**The Chair updated the Board on a number of items**

i) Internal Audit Tender

CRC's second tender exercise to find a new Internal Audit firm was successful. The CEO, Mr P Garrity, and Mr M McDonnell sat on the scoring panel, at which the firm received a high passing score and therefore were awarded the contract.

The Chair on behalf of the Board approved the Business Case and Purchase Order, which he presented to the Board at today's meeting.

Board members present approved the Business Case and Purchase Order, and recommended the decision to the Board members not present at the meeting.

Ms H George will now contact non-present Board members to ask for them to consider this Board member recommendation and approve the Business Case and Purchase Order.

**ACTION:** Ms H George to contact non-present Board members and ask for review and approval of the Business Case and Purchase Order for Internal Auditors, on the recommendation of the present Board members.

ii) Conflict of Interest Pro Forma

The Chair informed attendees that one member of the Board has yet to complete their Declaration of Interest Form, which is now three months overdue. As this form must be completed before Board members can take part in the Core Fund decision meeting, this Board member will therefore not be able to take part in this process, or any decision process related to grants.

iii) Board Evaluation and Appraisals

The Chair reminded the Board that the Evaluation process was recently reviewed by himself and Ms H George. It was decided that a new form would be introduced this year, which pulls out all items raised by Board members in the previous Evaluations.

These forms are currently with Board members for completion.

Ms H George will send a reminder to Board members whose forms are outstanding.

**ACTION:** Ms H George to send a reminder to Board Members who have yet to complete their Board Evaluations and Appraisals.

iv) Verbal Update

The Chair informed the Board that he was due to attend the Finance & General Purposes Committee meeting on 19<sup>th</sup> November, however, due to illness, was not able to. He thanked Mr McDonnell for stepping in and chairing that meeting.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> November the Chair and Mr J McCallister met with Mr G Johnston and Mr R Murtagh TEO, regarding the ongoing pension issue. They were advised that they would be called to attend a future TEO Audit and Risk Committee. The Chair is still awaiting further correspondence on this.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> January 2025 the Chair attended a meeting with staff related to the Core Funding eligibility checks.

The Chair and CEO met with the Parades Commission on 20<sup>th</sup> January.

The Chair attended the F&GP Committee on 23<sup>rd</sup> January.

The Board thanked the Chair for this update.

#### **4109/25**

#### **Operational Plan 2025-26**

The CEO presented the Board with the first draft of the Operational Plan 2025-26. As the TBUC Review has still not been published the draft could not take the outcome of the review into account

The CEO informed the Committee that Outcome 1, Funding and Development, has been linked to the Programme for Government. The Board will be familiar with the proposed outcomes set out in the Funding section, as they have not changed from 2024-25. The percentage targets have been left blank but will be added in the next draft.

The Engagement section is similar to the previous year, with the addition of CRC's obligations under the Rural Needs Act, and CRC's commitment to engage with work related to people with mixed needs and the minority ethnic community. The Engagement section may change depending on the outcome of the TBUC Policy Review. It is also proposed to conduct a Social Value Report for a number of Core Funded groups in 2025-26. The Plan notes CRC's commitment to the TEO Funders Forum project, as well as work on sustainability and the environment in conjunction with Ms H George (CRC Environment Champion).

The Governance Section remains the same as there are no changes to CRC's governance and public reporting responsibilities.

The CEO highlighted one item in the Governance section, the obligation to keep the bank balance below £130k at the end of the month. She informed the Committee that this was a requirement placed on CRC by TEO in the original MSFM. In December TEO incorrectly transferred £500k to CRC's account, which was more than was requested in the drawdown. TEO advised that it was not necessary to return the additional amount, therefore CRC's end of month balance was much higher than the £130k tolerance. TEO noted that it was their mistake and that holding that extra cash would not be a problem. The CEO will be raising CRC's obligation to hold below this total in the bank with TEO at the upcoming A&L meeting, as it may now be an unnecessary obligation.

The CEO highlighted the reporting of CRC's internal: external ratio in the Operational Plan. The proposed ratio for Engagement and Funding currently sits at 82%. The Chair noted that it would be helpful to achieve a more favourable ratio. It was noted that following a zero-based budget exercise conducted by Mr P Garrity and the CEO, that figure may now be closer to 88%. The team will continue to monitor this figure in the next draft.

As is usual at this stage in the planning process, this draft currently does not include a budget. This information will be added once it is received from TEO. At the moment the planning assumption is that the opening budget will be the same as last year.

The members present approved the draft plan. Ms H George will forward to the non-present Board members for review and approval, on the recommendation of present members.

**ACTION:** Ms H George will forward the Operational Plan on to the non-present Board members for review and approval, on the recommendation of present members.

The Chair noted his disappointment that the TBUC Review has not yet been published in time to include the outcomes in CRC's 2025-26 draft Operational Plan. He thanked the CEO for her work on the draft and for presenting it today.

#### **4110/25 Chief Executive Officer's Report**

The CEO presented the Committee with an update on a number of matters:

i) Awaiting response from TEO

The CEO informed the Committee that CRC have been in touch with TEO on a number of issues, and are still awaiting a response on the following items.

- Future of North Belfast Strategic Good Relations Programme
- TBUC Policy Review
- Board members confirmation letters on second term
- Chair's correspondence querying the recoupling of Pension Business Case and Pay Remit

These issues will be raised with Mr C Gardner when he joins the meeting today.

ii) Staffing

The Finance and General Purposes Committee discussed and approved a series of mitigations to pursue, to assist with CRC's DFAP team staffing issues, at their meeting in December. A follow up meeting of the Committee was held in January in a closed session. The Committee has agreed a temporary staffing structure which will be implemented and then reviewed annually. The temporary arrangement takes into account the difficulty in recruiting finance staff, the NIAO comment on this in the recent Report to those Charged with Governance, the earlier committee recommendation that governance and other issues in the DFAP Directorate be separated from finance. The temporary arrangement also takes account of the ongoing financial uncertainty, As recommended the DFAP Director role will not be filled at this point; resource from this saving will continue to be used to fund an Interim Finance Manager position; a temporary Governance Manager role reporting to the CEO will be internally trawled using resource from the unfilled Finance Manager role; the HR Manager post will line manage the admin officer and the temporary Governance Manager will line manage the Verification and Vouching team. The temporary structure will be kept under review as more information becomes available about wider financial and policy decisions in TEO.

The CEO informed the Board that the F&GP Committee had also considered a request relating to a Secondment in the closed session in January.

The CEO informed the Committee that Ms H DiDuca has returned from maternity leave and has settled back in to work. The temporary agency worker will continue to provide assistance to the funding team for the close down of the financial year.

iii) TEO Funders Forum

Following the production of a paper setting out the short, medium and long term recommendations coming from the 2024 Funders Forum meetings, the CEO and Mr A Walker met with Mr Gareth Johnston TEO, to present this work. He was content and asked for work to begin on implementing the short term recommendations. The CEO provided the Board with a copy of the final report and the Funding Forum Terms of Reference.

A meeting of the Forum will take place on 10<sup>th</sup> February.

iv) Shared Space

In relation to her report the CEO note that a number of articles were sought to include in a refresh of the Shared Space project. While CRC did receive submissions, the work to encourage submissions was time consuming for the Engagement Team. The team will now consider the next steps with the project, and how it will publish articles submitted.

v) Other meetings

The CEO met at his request with Mr A Paccinani, a representative from 'World on the Move'. He briefed the CEO on this project which aims to raise global youth awareness about the concept of peace, promote a culture of dialogue, and discourage extreme viewpoints. They will be in touch again regarding the next steps of their project and what kind of relationship they would like to have with CRC.

The CEO and Chair met Ms E Collins and Mr R Roche from the Parades Commission for an update on the work of each organisation. They were particularly interested in CRC's yearly temperature check-ins with community groups before the summer period.

The CEO, Mr P Garrity and Ms H George met the new Internal Auditors on 16<sup>th</sup> January for contract initiation, providing background information on CRC, and providing information on previous audits. This puts CRC back on track with the internal audit timeline.

The Board thanked the CEO for the work included in her paper and noted the report.

#### **4111 Good Relations Awards 2025**

Mr P Day informed the Board that 62 nominations have been received for the Good Relations Awards. The award nomination was extended to 13<sup>th</sup> January and enabled 40 more nominations to be made.

The Youth award received 9 nominations. Connecting Communities received 17. CRC Exceptional Achievement received 15. Community Champion received 11. Housing for all received 5. Volunteer of the year received 5.

The team hope to work with the Education Authority next year to bring a new award to the set.

The Board discussed and agreed that the decision panel would be made up of Mr M McDonald, Ms N Tandon, and Mr J McCallister, with Ms M Braniff and Ms C Harris as reserves.

Mr P Day will be in contact with the panel to arrange a meeting date.

**ACTION:** Mr P Day to contact GR Award panel member to agree date of meeting.

#### **4112/25 The Executive Office**

Mr C Gardner, TEO, joined the Board meeting. He updated members on a number of issues:

- i) North Belfast Strategic Good Relations Programme

Mr C Gardner stated that the scheme will run in its current form for at least another year. While the budget has not been announced, CRC and TEO will request and review applications to the scheme from the current groups, with a view to the budget being approved in due course.

The department will consider the future of the scheme following the publication of the TBUC Review.

ii) TBUC Review

The Committee asked for an update on the outstanding TBUC Review. Mr C Gardner stated that he expects the outcome to be issued in due course. The review is currently with Ministers for comment and sign off.

iii) Programme for Government

Mr C Gardner expects the Programme for Government to be launched soon. He agreed with CRC's view that peace should be included across all areas of the Programme.

iv) Board Letters

The Board expressed their disappointment that they have still not received their official letters setting out their second terms on the Board. The Chair indicated that it is having an impact on member engagement and morale. A number of Board members terms are due to end within the year, and they will need clarity on this as soon as possible. He added that CRC have been informed from TEO that the increase in Board members attendance fees cannot be implemented until this correspondence has been received by members.

Mr C Gardner stated that the letters are still with the Ministers for approval, but assured the Board that they still have the authority to make business decision on the organisation's behalf.

v) Pension Business Case

The Chair updated Mr C Gardner on the status of CRC's Pension Business Case. Following the recommendation from TEO, CRC went to tender for an external firm to assist with the financial aspects of the business case. TEO approved a January Monitoring Round budget of £15k for this work. The tender exercise was unsuccessful. Feedback from the firms approached showed that no firm had all the expertise to complete the work and they themselves would have to procure external expert legal advice to assist, and therefore the £15k would not be commercially viable. A budget of £25k-30k would be more appropriate. The Board and Mr C Gardner discussed the possible next steps and agreed that the Chair would write to Mr G Johnston, updating on the tender exercise, and seek TEO's agreement that the budget be increased and ask if a second tender

exercise should take place. The letter will indicate that CRC will submit the next Pay Remit when appropriate, and hope that the progress made so far will allow it to be processed as normal.

It was recommended that Mr C Gardner ensure that Mr G Johnston is aware that the decoupling of the Pension Business Case and Pay Remit was proposed by the Department of Finance following their own legal advice.

**ACTION:** Chair to write to Mr G Johnston regarding the Pension Business Case, providing an update on the tender exercise, the feedback received and advice on the next steps.

vi) Core Fund Applications

Mr B McDonald informed Mr C Gardner that the Core Fund scheme is likely to be very oversubscribed for 2025-26 if the budget remains the same as 2024-25. If funding was increased CRC would be able to fund many more groups than currently possible.

He added that the cost-of-living crisis continues to impact groups, as will the Chancellors National Insurance increases.

The Board thanked Mr C Gardner for attending today's meeting.

**Mr. Gardner left the meeting**

**4113/25 Good Relations Week Evaluation**

Mr P Day presented the Board with the outcome of the recent Good Relations Week review.

A number of recommendations have been accepted by the team. Mr P Day highlighted four recommendations which are still being considered.

The first of these recommendations suggested that a 15-20% budget increase would be necessary to address the rising cost of advertising, fees and branded material. The team are considering whether additional distinct packages of resource could be used to assist with the delivery of the Week.

The second recommendation suggested a media partner would increase visibility of the campaign. The team are seeking further information on what this would require.

The third recommendation suggested a dedicated content creator would increase visibility of the Week. The team are seeking further information on what this would require.



Lastly, there was a recommendation that suggested that Good Relations Week would benefit from being moved to October, to allow further participation of schools and more time for planning. The Board discussed this recommendation and approved it. Ms H George will now contact non-present Board members for their view on this recommendation.

ACTION: Ms H George to contact non-present Board members with the Board recommendation that Good Relations Week move to October in 2025, for their consideration and decision.

The Board thanked Mr P Day for presenting the evaluation and noted the paper.

**4114/25      Engagement Update**

Mr P Day presented the Board with an update on the work of the Engagement Team. The Board thanks Mr P Day and noted the report.

**4115/25      Funding Update**

Mr B McDonnell updated the Board on a number of Funding matters:

i)      Core Fund Decision Meeting

The Board discussed who should sit on the panel of the Core Fund Decision meeting and the Review meeting. It was agreed that Mr M McDonald, Mr J McCallister, Ms A Simpson, Mr R Campbell, and Ms C Harris would sit on the decision panel; and Mr M McDonnell and Ms M Braniff would sit on the review panel.

ii)     Core Cost of Living Payments

Mr B McDonald informed the Board that there will be additional resource in quarter four to provide all Core Fund groups with up to £2k for cost of living pressures.

The Board members present approved the recommendation. Ms H George will now contact Board members who were not present at the meeting, and set out the Board member's recommendation for their review and decision.

ACTION: Ms H George to contact non-present Board members with the Board recommendation that Core

Groups receive up to £2k in cost of living payment in quarter four 2024-25, for their consideration and decision.

iii) General Funding Update

Mr B McDonald presented the Committee with a report updating on the current funding streams.

The Core Decision meeting will be taking place on 27<sup>th</sup> February. 10 applications were rejected at the eligibility stage. These applicants were given the opportunity to appeal the decision. Two independent members will sit on the panel to review the decisions on 10<sup>th</sup> February.

32 Core applications are currently under assessment.

The CRCD budget has been increased to £250k following the successful January Monitoring Round bid. The grant scheme will remain open to applications until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025. Ms S Jones will continue her work at CRC, assisting with the close down of the 2024-25 year, until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025.

iv) Funding Sub Group Meeting

Mr B McDonald presented the Board with the notes from December's Funding Sub-Group.

At the meeting Mr D McNally presented the Group with a draft new Outcomes Framework, with the hopes that it can be tested with a number of Core Fund groups in 2025-26.

The Board members present approved the draft and recommended it to the non-present Board members for approval.

ACTION: Ms H George to contact Board members not present at today's meeting, with the present Board members recommendation that the draft Outcomes Framework be approved and tested in 2025-26, and ask for their review and decision.

The Board thanked Mr B McDonald for his presentations today and noted the reports.

**4116/25 Purchase Order**

The CEO presented the Board with a Purchase Order for CRC's External Audit Fees, from the NI Audit Office, totalling £21,900.

Ms H George assured the Committee that this figure is in line with what has reported to the Audit Committee earlier in 2024.

The Board members present approved the purchase order, which will now be send on to the non-present Board members for their review and decision.

ACTION: Ms H George to contact Board members not present at today's meeting, with the present Board members recommendation that the NIAO Audit Fee Purchase Order be approved.

**4117/25 Finance and General Purposes Committee**

i) Approved Minutes of 19<sup>th</sup> November 2024 meeting

The minutes of November's Finance and General Purposes Committee were noted.

ii) Verbal update on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2025 F&GP meeting

The Chair provided the Board with an update on the Finance and General Purposes Committee meeting which took place on 23<sup>rd</sup> January.

The Committee was presented with CRC's Performance Report and Delivery Report, which showed that outcomes are on track to be delivered n 2024/25.

A finance update was provided to the Committee.

Mr P Garrity informed the Committee that CRC's January Monitoring Round bids were successful, with an extra £45k allocated for CRCD grant, and £15k allocated for the pension business case consultant. The Chair noted that CRC will now seek approval from TEO to increase this business case budget.

The Chair informed the Board that CRC are currently pursuing a £600.00 refund from a group in receipt of 2023/24 CRCD grant.

The F&GP Committee held two closed sessions (December and January) to discuss a temporary structure to mitigate the current DFAP staffing shortages and to deal with a secondment issue .

The Board thanked the Chair for this update.

**4118/25 Staffing Update**

Ms J Adamson provided the Board with a paper setting out the current staffing situation at CRCs.

She informed the Board that the F&GP Committee recommended that the Secondment Policy be suspended, due to the current staffing levels in CRC. This decision will be conveyed to the Union.

**ACTION:** Ms J Adamson to inform the Union of the Committee's decision to suspend the Secondment Policy.

The Board thanked Ms J Adamson and noted the report.

#### **4119/25 Management Accounts**

The CEO presented the Board with CRC's year-to-date Management Accounts and highlight report, prepared by Mr P Garrity.

The final approved budget for CRC in 2024-25 is £3,213k. The successful January Monitoring Round saw an additional £45k allocated to CRCD and £15k for the Pension Business Case.

Following the discussion at F&GP and earlier in the meeting, Mr P Garrity will be instructed to complete the Pay Remit process as normal when the opportunity comes.

The CEO informed the Board that CRC recently received confirmation from TEO that the organisation will be liable for the increase in National Insurance contributions. This will total approximately £17k for the organisation. This will be offset by £6k due to the increase in the Employer Allowance.

The Board thanked the CEO for this update and noted the Accounts.

#### **4120/25 Audit and Risk Assurance Committee**

i) Approved minutes of the 14<sup>th</sup> November 2024 meeting

The Board noted the minutes of this meeting.

ii) Verbal update on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2025 ARAC meeting

Ms J McCallister, Chair of the Committee, updated the Board on the most recent meeting.

The Committee were informed of the successful Internal Audit tender, and received a presentation of a draft Plan from the firm appointed.

CRC's Register of Audit Recommendations currently has three items remaining: the pension issue; succession planning for finance roles; and the completion of the NILGOSC pension form.

There are no live investigations into funded groups, no direct awards, and no purchases without a price check.

iii) Risk Register

Mr J McCallister presented the Board with CRC's most up to date Risk Register.

Currently sitting on the register are the following risks:

- Pension issue – remains rated red. Details on this risk have been reported to the Board previously in the meeting.
- Staffing – remains rated red. A paper setting out a number of mitigations was taken to the F&GP Committee in December and January.
- NILGOSC pension case – remains rated amber. There has been no further progress on this case.
- Resources – remains rated amber. This risk remains on the register due to the effects of recent budget cuts.
- Board letters – remains rated red. Board official letters setting out confirmation of the second terms are still outstanding.
- Procurement of Internal Audit – was downgraded to green as a firm is now in contract to complete this work. It will be removed from the register ahead of the next meeting.

The Board thanked Mr J McCallister for this update.

**4121/25      Any Other Business**

The CEO reminded Board members to submit any outstanding Travel and Subsistence forms before the 31<sup>st</sup> March.

**4122/25      Date of Next Meeting**

10<sup>th</sup> March 2pm