

**MINUTES OF THE TWO HUNDRED AND FOURTY EIGHTH MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY RELATIONS
COUNCIL BOARD HELD ON MONDAY 10th MARCH 11:30AM
ANTEROOM, EQUALITY HOUSE**

4123/25 Present: Mr M McDonald (Chair), Mr R Campbell, Mr J McCallister, Ms M Braniff.

4124/25 In Attendance: Dr J Irwin (CEO), Mr P Day (Director of Engagement), Mr B McDonald (Director of Funding), Ms J Adamson (HR Manager), Mr P Garrity (Finance Manager) Ms H George (EA to CEO and Board)

4125/25 Observers: Mr C Gardner (TEO).

4126/25 Apologies: Ms S McClelland, Ms C Harris, Ms N Tandon, Ms A Simpson, Mr M McDonnell.

4127/25 Welcome

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

He noted that the meeting is not quorate, however Ms C Harris provided her approval for the decisions prior to the meeting and therefore any unanimous decision by the members present will be a quorate decision.

4128/25 Standard Checks

No conflicts were raised and no gifts have been received

4129/25 Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting were reviewed and approved.

4130/25 Matters Arising

The Board noted the matters arising report.

4131/25 Bank Mandate

The CEO informed the Board that, following a Department of Finance Procurement exercise a new banking provider has been contracted for all named bodies. CRC are a named body on the list therefore must move to this new provider.

The Board approved the Danske Bank Access Agreement Form, the Account Opening Agreement Form, and all the named users of the account. The Chair then signed the forms on behalf of the Board.

4132/25 Correspondence

i) New Years Honours

The Chair informed the Board that a nomination is currently in progress, for the individual the Board previously agreed to put forward.

ii) Opening Budget Letter

The CEO presented the Board with CRC's opening budget letter, provided by TEO. The letter states that CRC's budget will be the same as the 2024/25 opening budget plus £60k. She explained that the £60k will largely be used for CRC's inescapable cost increases and as

he budget is well below CRC's 2024/25 closing budget Monitoring Rounds will be required in year to improve the position.

4133/25 Chair's Update

The Chair updated the Board on a number of events and meeting he has recently attended.

On the 13th February the Chair attended the scoring session of the Good Relations Award nominations.

On the 25th February the Chair met with Mr B McDonald in preparation for the Core Fund meeting, which took place on 27th February.

The Chair informed the Board that he is still yet to receive a response from TEO to the correspondence issued on 31st January. This letter, previously shared with members, informed TEO of the outcome of the pension business case procurement exercise, and asked for their advice about the next steps. The CEO informed the meeting that TEO had been in touch via an email on this issue and provided a list of recruitment agencies that CRC could approach to assist with the completion of the Business Case, if that is ultimately the direction TEO advise CRC to follow.

Board members will have an opportunity at today's meeting to raise this issue again with Mr C Gardner when he joins.

4134/25 Operational Plan 2025/26

The CEO presented the Board with the second draft of the Operational Plan for 2025/26. The first draft of the plan was shared with TEO and there has been no feedback so far.

She highlighted the changes that have been made since the previous draft. These updates have been made to reflect some of the details coming out of the TBUC

Policy Review, which has been confidentially shared with CRC and will be the subject of Chris Gardner's presentation to this Board meeting .

The Publication Grant and Media Grant have been combined into a 'Learning Resource Fund', the details of which will be firmed up in the guidance notes developed during the year.

Emergency gap funding remains in the Plan, in the form of the Pathfinder grant. This has not opened to applications for several years due to resourcing, however, there is a clear need for it in 2025/26. This will be raised with TEO as extra funding would need to be provided.

The anti-racism work appears in this Plan as CRC hopes to see movement in CRC's involvement in this work in the TBUC Review. This will continue to be raised with TEO.

The Engagement section has been updated to group a number of outcomes together under the title 'Centre of Excellence'. More will be built into this programme area if extra in-year resource is provided.

The Board thanked the CEO for this presentation and approved the final draft of the Operational Plan for 2025/26. This will now go back to TEO again for comment.

4135/25 CEO's Report

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

i) Issues to be raised with TEO during today's meeting

The CEO reminded members of the issues that they may wish to raise with Mr C Gardner when he arrives at the meeting today:

- Board members' term of office
- Core Fund oversubscribed, more resources needed
- Programme for Government implications for Good Relations work
- Pension Business Case
- Legal correspondence re. unsuccessful grant applicant

ii) Strategic Planning

The CEO reminded Board members that CRC's Strategic Plan is currently on hold at the request of TEO until the review of the TBUC Policy has been published

iii) Staffing

Work has begun on the structural changes agreed at the last F&GP meeting, and an internal trawl is currently underway for the Governance position. It closes to applications today.

iv) TEO

The Funders Forum has entered phase two, which sees the formation of Working Groups to review and implement the recommendations made in phase one. The working groups are: Comms; Process; and Monitoring & Evaluation. Correspondence will shortly be sent to the G5s involved in the Forum, asking them to encourage their staff to join these working groups, and to recommit to the work themselves.

CRC have received permission from TEO to veer into CRCD the £15k awarded to CRC for the Pension Business Case external assistance, as the procurement exercise was unsuccessful. The Chair still awaits a response to his correspondence to TEO dated 31st January 2025.

The CEO attended a celebration of UK and Irish culture reception on 5th March hosted by the UK Prime Minister and the Taoiseach of Ireland.

The CEO and Mr B McDonald attended a meeting at the request of MLA Ms P Bradshaw to discuss the North Belfast Strategic Good Relations Programme. Another meeting request on the same subject has been received from MLA Mr P Brett, which will take place in due course.

v) Engagement

The TBUC Engagement Forum will be taking place on 25th March where the Good Relations Awards will be made.

A Shared Learning Forum took place on 6th March focusing on how and why social value should be measured.

vi) Other Meetings

The CEO met with the Chief Executive Officer of the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery on 25th February, where she received an outline of their work.

The Board thanked the CEO for this report and the work it presents.

Mr C Gardner joined the meeting.

4136/25 Discussion with Mr C Gardner TEO

i) TBUC Review

Board members were presented with a confidential summary of the TBUC Review, which is still in draft stage and not available publicly.

They reviewed the section specific to CRC and the North Belfast Strategy Good Relations Programme.

Board members discussed the need for a new grant that supports the development of new organisations. The grant should be flexible and responsive to flashpoints. They also discussed those applications that score in the 'fundable but no resource available' section of the Core awards.

Mr C Gardner informed members that the draft review is currently with ministers for comment.

ii) Programme for Government

The Board asked if there had been any changes made to the draft that went out to consultation. Mr C Gardner stated that there has been no change to the substance of the document.

iii) Board Terms

Mr C Gardner informed the Board that the draft letters are currently with Ministers for sign off. He will raise this again with the Ministers' Offices. There may be an opportunity to extend the first terms length again if the letters are not signed off in time.

The Board expressed their disappointment that they are still waiting for this correspondence. It has affected members' morale and the quorum levels at recent meetings. A number of Board members terms, taking into account the proposed 18 month extension, are due to come to an end this year, and process for recruiting new members should have already begun.

In addition, the Board member and Chair's attendance rate increases cannot be implemented until this correspondence is received.

iv) Pension Business Case

Mr C Gardner stated that the Chair should expect to receive an official response to his correspondence, sent on 31st January, this week.

v) Legal Correspondence

Board members noted that CRC recently received correspondence notifying of pre-action to a Judicial Review, from a group which did not meet the requirements of the Core Fund grant application process at eligibility stage. The Community Relations Council is taking legal advice on this issue.

Mr C Gardner stated that the group had been in contact with Ministers and the Department will be liaising with them on this matter.

vi) Core Fund Opportunity Cost

At the Core Fund meeting attendees were presented with a large list of organisations whose applications were deemed fundable but could not be supported due to the lack of

resource. 23 groups were deemed fundable, but resource is only available to make 12 awards. Mr B McDonald presented this list to Mr C Gardner.

Linked to the discussion the CEO asked Mr B McDonald to put together some information on the opportunity cost arising from the limited resources. This should include details from these groups workplans and applications to show what work could have been completed if funding was available.

ACTION: Mr B McDonald to put together paper on the opportunity cost of underfunding the Core Fund Scheme.

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

Mr C Gardner left the meeting.

41/36/25 Purchase Order

Mr P Garrity presented the Board with a Purchase Order for Jan 2025-Jan 2026 use of Flexigrant software. The Board were assured that the procurement exercise for this software was completed at the beginning of the contract in 2024 and in line with CRC's Procurement Policy.

The Board approved this Purchase Order.

4137/25 Funding and Development Update

Mr B McDonald updated the Board on a number of matters.

The Core Fund Decision Meeting took place on 27th February, where assessments and financial reviews were considered in the scoring of the applications. Groups whose applications were not successful have now been notified and are able to submit an appeal to the decision.

The CRCD grant is still open to applications, with £200k already committed and a very small budget left.

The North Belfast Strategic Good Relations Programme groups are in the process of submitting their claims, with £150k to be accrued to cover these claims.

The Funding Team are now back up to full staffing levels. A temporary agency worker will remain with CRC to assist with the year end tasks.

The Funding Sub Group will meet in quarter one of 2025/26 and will consider recommendations coming out of the Core Fund process.

The Board thanked Mr B McDonald for this update and noted the report.

4138/25 Management Accounts

Mr P Garrity presented the Board with the February 2025 Management Accounts.

He highlighted a 22k variance in predicted spend and actual spend, due to timing differences with grant payments. He stated that there are no areas of concern.

The January Monitoring Round bid was successful and as a result £45k was awarded to CRCD. The £15k that TEO approved for CRC's Pension Business Case assistance has now been veered into CRCD, with the approval of TEO, as the procurement exercise was unsuccessful.

The closing year position is anticipated to be £3,155k. £1.8mil was spend directly on grants, £9.9k on capital spend.

Mr P Garrity is accruing the Pay Remit payments as well as the Board members attendance fee increases into 2025/26.

The Chair thanked Mr P Garrity for his hard work, and thanked the rest of the finance team for their assistance.

4139/25 Engagement Update

Mr P Day updated the Board on the work of the Engagement Team.

The Good Relations Awards will be presented on 25th March at the Engagement Forum. He thanked those Board members who sat on the decision panel. Ministers have been invited to attend the event.

Videos are being put together about each of the award winners and their work. They will all have the opportunity at make a speech at the award ceremony.

Following the agreement at the last Board meeting, the new dates for Good Relations Week 2025 have been set as 13th Oct-19th Oct.

A Shared Learning Forum took place on 6th March, about the importance and usefulness of determining a projects Social Value. This was a well-attended event, and groups were very engaged with the topic.

The Board thanked Mr P Day for this update and noted the report.

4140/25 Staffing Update

Mr J Adamson provided the Board with a paper updating on CRC's current staffing position.

The newly created Governance role is currently open to an internal trawl, closing to applications noon on 10th March. This role will be reviewed annually.

Ms J Adamson met with Ms G Attwood in preparation for her return to CRC in April, following her secondment with TEO.

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

4141/25 Pension Business Case

Ms J Adamson provided the Board with an update on the Pension Business Case. CRC are awaiting a response to the Chair's correspondence issued on 31st January.

The Board noted this report.

4142/25 Audit and Risk Assurance Committee

i) Verbal update on 6th March meeting

Mr J McCallister, the Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee provided a verbal update to the Board on the most recent Committee meeting, which took place on 6th March.

The NI Audit Office attended the meeting and presented the Audit Strategy for 2024/25. The work will commence at the end of May with a view to certification in October.

There has been an increase in the NIAO audit fee, of 2.5%. The Committee were content with this increase as it aligns with inflation.

CRC took part in the annual National Fraud Initiative fraud check. Payroll and creditors were tested, and no issues were found.

CRC's new internal auditors presented the draft Internal Audit Plan for 2024/25. They will be reviewing: grants administration; Engagement programme; and Risk Governance/Management in March and April 2025.

Three items remain on CRC's Register of Audit Recommendations: Pension issue; finance staff succession planning; and AON Report Pro Forma.

There are no investigations into funded groups, no direct awards to report, and one purchase which did not require a price check, which relates to venue and catering hire for a North Belfast Programme meeting.

ii) Risk Register

Mr J McCallister presented the Board with the latest Risk Register.

The 'Pension Issue' remains rated red. Following feedback from the unsuccessful pension business case procurement exercise, the Chair wrote to Mr G Johnston TEO on 31st January to inform him of the outcome of the exercise and ask for advice on next steps. The Chair awaits a response to this correspondence.

The 'Staffing' risk remains rated red. The F&GP Committee approved a new structure and a new role to separate out the finance and governance tasks in the DFAP Directorate, an internal trawl is currently open. The CEO continues to raise the grading issue with TEO, seeking advice on how to begin a grading review process.

The 'McCloud Pension Case' remains rated amber, as there has been no change to this risk.

The '2024/25 Resource' risk remains rated amber. CRC remain on budget and Mr P Garrity continues to monitor the situation closely. The 2025/26 opening budget letter

has now been received, and while a £60k increase has been made on the 2024/25 opening budget, it is still below CRC's closing position for the current year. CRC will be able to progress all inescapable costs, however, may need to pause some aspects of the Operational Plan if no extra resource is provided in year.

iii) Minutes of 23rd Jan 2025 ARAC meeting

Mr J McCallister provided the Committee with the approved minutes of the January 2025 Audit Committee.

The Board thanked Mr J McCallister for this updated and noted the Reports.

4142/25 Any Other Business

i) Expenses

The Chair reminded members to submit their expenses before year end.

4143/25 Date of Next Meeting

6th May 11:30am