

NI Community Relations Council
Minutes of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held on Thursday 23rd January 2025 at
1:00pm
Ante Room Equality House

Present: Mr M McDonald (Chair of Committee and Board), Ms A Simpson (Board Member), Ms N Tandon (Board Member), Mr M McDonnell (Board Member)

In Attendance: Dr J Irwin (CEO), Ms J Adamson (HR Manager), Mr P Garrity (Finance Manager), Mr P Day (Engagement Director), Ms N Maguire (Vouching and Verification Officer), Ms H George (EA to CEO)

Apologies: None

1. Welcome

The Chair welcomed members to the meeting. He thanked Mr M McDonnell for taking on the Chair duties for the previous meeting in his absence.

2. Conflict of Interest

None recorded.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting were reviewed and approved.

4. Closed Session

The Finance and General Purposes Committee Board members held a closed session to discuss the temporary staffing structure, a secondment extension request and the suspension of the secondment policy.

HG, PG & NM left the meeting for the secondment discussion and after that was concluded PD & JA also left the meeting for the remainder of the closed session.

The Committee decided that CRC's Secondment Policy should be suspended due to CRC being a much smaller organisation now than when the policy was originally put in place (52 as opposed to 16 staff) and the persistent shortage of staff.

The Committee approved the conclusion of the current secondment after it's extended period of three years had concluded.

The Committee approved a new temporary staffing structure.

Staff rejoined the meeting

5. Matters Arising

The Chair reviewed the matters arising from the previous Committee meeting. He thanked Ms H George and Ms J Adamson for their comprehensive review of a number of CRC's policies.

The Chair attended a meeting with Mr J McCallister and Mr D Johnston, TEO, to discuss the pension issue. They are awaiting an invite to attend TEO's next Audit and Risk Assurance Committee.

Ms J Adamson informed the Committee that, following the approval of the Staff Handbook at the previous meeting, the Union was consulted and the updated draft was approved. It has now been issued to staff.

Ms J Adamson informed the Committee that all outstanding Health and Safety recommendations have now been implemented.

The CEO updated the Committee on her Accountability and Liaison meeting with TEO. She raised the grading levels of CRC staff. TEO was unsure of the process involved in a grading review, and will come back to CRC with details in due course.

The Chair thanked staff for these updates.

6. Performance Management

i) Quarter Three Performance Report

The CEO presented the Committee with CRC's quarter three Performance Report. This report sets out the risks, staffing report, finance update and achievements for the quarter.

This report was provided to TEO and will be discussed at the upcoming Accountability and Liaison meeting.

ii) Operational Plan.

The CEO presented the Committee with the updated Operational Plan for quarter three. CRC are on track to delivery all outcomes, with the exception of outcomes related to assisting TEO with their own grant scoring. CRC have been asked to participate in the assessment of the TEO's 2025-26 Central Good Relations Fund.

The committee thanked the CEO for the update on the 3rd quarter delivery and thanked all staff for continuing to meet targets despite the staff shortages during the year.

7. Management Accounts

Mr P Garrity presented the Committee with CRC's Management Accounts to date.

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.

Following the allocation through the January Monitoring Round, CRC's 2024/25 budget is now £3,213k. £1.489k allocated to grants.

TEO was in contact in December asking if extra funding became available, would CRC be able to spend it in year. The Funding team and Mr P Garrity met to discuss how to use the extra

resources and submitted a proposal to TEO. TEO then came back to inform CRC that this extra resource was no longer available.

Mr P Garrity informed the Committee that the increase in National Insurance Contributions will be applied to all public bodies, including CRC, and will add an extra £17k expense in 2025-26. This will be offset by £6k due to the changes in employer allowance.

DoF have released details of the 2024/25 and 2025/26 Pay Remits, which are currently with the civil service union for consideration. Paul has accrued the proposed 3% for 2024/25 and will do the same for the 6% in 2025/26.

The Committee raised their concern at the Permanent Secretary's intention to re-couple the Pay Remit and the pension business case. The Chair noted that the Board worked hard to get these issues de-coupled a number of years ago when DoF received their own legal advice on the issue. The Committee discussed options open to them including: raising again with Mr C Gardner; raising with Mr D Malcolm, and raising with Ministers. This will be discussed at the upcoming Board meeting.

The Committee thanked Mr P Garrity for this update and noted the reports.

8. Temporary Agency Staff Purchase Order Update

The CEO presented the Committee with the most up to date totals for the purchase orders for CRC's two current temporary agency staff members.

The Committee noted the update on the purchase orders totals.

9. Vouching and Verification Report

Ms N Maguire presented the Committee with a report setting out the current position of CRC's vouching and verification work.

The claims submissions and vouching process for 2024-25 is progressing and all first claims for the Core scheme have been received and vouched.

Three of the ten North Belfast groups have submitted their first claims, and one group has submitted four claims. This is typical of the scheme due to the nature of the spending pattern and cash flow position of the groups, who can submit between one and five claims annually.

CRCD has made 42 payments so far in 2024-25, with the majority of claims to be received in quarter four and quarter one 2025-26. One 2023-24 CRCD grant which CRC are seeking a refund is still outstanding. The team continue to pursue this.

Verification visits for Core and North Belfast grants have now all been completed along with 5 verification checks for groups that are new to the Core Scheme in 2024-25.

The Committee thanked Ms Maguire for her update and noted the report.

10. Staffing Update

Ms J Adamson provided the Committee with a report setting out the current staffing position, which was discussed during a closed session at the beginning of the meeting.

In addition to what was discussed earlier in the closed session, Ms J Adamson reported that Ms H DiDuca has returned from maternity leave. The temporary agency worker for her maternity cover, Ms S Jones, will continue to provide assistance to the funding team for the close down of the financial year.

The Committee thanked Ms J Adamson and noted the report.

11. Pension Issue

Ms J Adamson reminded the Committee that TEO had asked CRC to complete a procurement exercise to find a consultant to assist with the completion of the pension business case. The tender closed on 6th January and no bids were made.

Initial feedback from the firms approached indicates that the £15k budget would not cover the cost of the work as many firms would have to procure legal advice themselves.

The Committee instructed Ms J Adamson to seek further feedback from the groups on what a more realistic budget would be. Responses from this exercise will be provided to the Board at their meeting on 28th January for discussion and a decision on the next steps.

ACTION: Ms J Adamson to seek further feedback from the firms approached in the pension business case tender, and ask what a realistic budget may be for this work.

12. Sick Absence Report

Ms J Adamson presented the Committee with CRC's Sick Absence Report for quarter three.

Overall there has been a significant reduction in total sickness absence compared to the same period last year, decreasing from 49.5 days in quarter three 2023-24 to 26 days in quarter three 2024-25.

No staff members are currently on long term sick leave.

The associated costs of sickness absence have decreased significantly from £11,184 in quarter three 2023-24 to £5,724 in quarter three 2024-25.

The Committee commended CRC on these sick leave statistics, noting the significant reduction in sick leave compared to the same period in the previous year.

13. Health and Safety Update

Ms J Adamson updated the Committee on the health and safety recommendations which were noted as 'ongoing' at the last Finance and General Purposes Committee. All outstanding recommendations are now complete. The firm who completed the health and safety audit were satisfied with this update, and marked them all complete on the audit file.

The Committee thanked Ms J Adamson for this update.

14. Premises Committee

Ms J Adamson updated the Committee on the work of the Equality House Premises Committee.

Equality House will be closed due to the incoming storm on Friday 24th January, a note will be sent to all staff notifying them of this.

There has been no further movement on CRC's premises beyond July 2026, when the Equality House lease expires.

ECNI have conducted a pre-market tender enquiries regarding the IT services contract which is coming to an end soon. One firm was interested in the contract, and are working towards the necessary ISO 27000 accreditation.

All planned preventative maintenance has been completed.

Ms J Adamson informed the Committee that those now working at Equality House reception are security staff. The Committee noted the additional measures that have been implemented at reception. They asked if CRC's Board members would be able to get permanent passes. Ms J Adamson will contact ECNI and ask if this is possible.

ACTION: Ms J Adamson to contact ECNI and ask if CRC's Board members would be entitled to hold permanent passes for Equality House.

The Committee thanked Ms J Adamson for this update.

15. Any Other Business

Ms P Garrity reminded members to return their Travel and Subsistence forms to CRC by 31st March.

16. Date of Next Meeting

Ms George will be in contact with members to agree a date in quarter one 2025-26.

