

NI Community Relations Council
Minutes of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held on Monday 23rd June 2025
3:00pm
Online

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), Mr P Garrity (Finance Manager), Ms H George (Governance Manager)

Apologies: Ms N Maguire (Vouching and Verification Officer) & Ms J Adamson (HR Manager)

1. Welcome

The Chair welcomed Board members and staff to the meeting.

2. Minutes

The Committee reviewed and approved the minutes of the 29th April 2025 meeting.

3. Matters Arising

None

4. Conflicts of Interest

None

5. 2024/25 Annual Report and Accounts

The CEO presented the Committee with CRC's 2024/25 Annual Report and Account. The Report follows the same layout as previous years. It contains sections including: Chair's Forward; CEO Comment; Strategic Report; Sustainability Report; Directors' Report; Directors' Responsibilities; and Remuneration Report. There is currently a blank section related to Assembly Accountability where the NI Audit Office report will be inserted once complete.

Mr P Garrity took the Committee through the Accounts section, explaining that there have been some changes to the IFRS reporting from last year. A review of the grants information has already been completed by the auditors, and the full audit will begin on 28th July 2025.

The CEO thanked Mr P Garrity, Ms H George and whole CRC team for helping put the report together, and the work that it represents. This is the first draft which will be reviewed by NIAO in the summer. The final draft will then come before the Board for approval in the Autumn at the Annual General Meeting.

The Chair and Committee thanked Mr P Garrity, Dr J Irwin, and the CRC team for their work on this. They approved the draft 2024/25 Annual Report and Accounts.

The CEO added that, following the completion of the Annual Report and Accounts last year, it was decided that a zero-based budget exercise would be conducted. This was reported to the Committee during 2024, and was useful in the discussions prior to the structural changes within the DFAP team.

6. Solvency and Liquidity

Mr P Garrity presented the Committee with CRC's Solvency and Liquidity Report, which was circulated ahead of the meeting.

The Report shows that CRC is both solvent and liquid and can reasonably be expected to remain so to 31st March 2026.

CRC have been given the authority to spend by The Executive Office, through the 2025/25 Opening Budget Allocation letter and the follow up Revised Budget Allocation. The £3,076k budget is larger than the 2024/25 Opening Budget, but significantly below the 2024/25 year-end spend. CRC will require resource through the Monitoring Rounds to address pressures in year.

A 45% cash cap has been put in place until the budget has passed in Westminster. This places significant pressure on cash spend, which Mr P Garrity and the Funding Director are closely monitoring.

The CEO explained that at this time of year CRC would usually be encouraging groups to submit their Core Fund claims and return their Letters or Offer, however, this year staff will not pursue the swift return of these forms, as a way to manage the 45% cap issue.

Mr P Garrity highlighted from the Solvency and Liquidity Report that CRC's pension is restricted to £0, and current restricted income funds sits at -£289,617. This restricted income is due the timing difference related to CRC's accruals accounting practice, and is not a cause for concern.

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

7. Management Accounts May 2025

Mr P Garrity presented the Committee with the May 2025 Management Accounts.

He highlighted that £344k has already been paid out to grants in this financial year, with £323,108 of that being from 2024/25 grants.

Mr P Garrity has submitted the 2024/25 and 2025/26 Pay Remits, along with the Board Members Pay Remits to TEO. CRC awaits a response from TEO on this.

The Committee thanked Mr P Garrity for his work and noted the report.

8. Vouching and Verification Report

In Ms N Maguire's absence Ms H George presented the Committee with the Vouching and Verification Report, prepared by Ms N Maguire and circulated prior to the meeting.

The Report shows that of the 30 2024/25 Core Fund final year claims, 11 have been completed and 19 are still due to be done. The North Belfast claims differ from the Core claims as they may consist of 1-5 submissions based on the number of workplans each group run. Of the ten North Belfast groups each have now submitted one claim. To date 32 of the 2024/25 CRCD have been fully completed and paid, 14 claims are in the process of being vouched or due to be submitted to TEO.

A second table within the report shows the 2025/26 funding information. It shows that 28 Core Grants have been awarded, along with the ten North Belfast contract holders, and 7 CRCD grants so far this year.

The Committee noted that the 2023/24 CRCD grant which CRC are awaiting a refund for has not progressed since the last report. They asked that, for the next meeting, they be provided with information on:

- Who correspondence was sent to from the group
- A timeline of the correspondence and examples
- Details on what the next steps are in closing down this issue

If no progress is made before the next Committee meeting, the Committee will consider whether an official letter should be sent to the Chair of the group.

- Following this CRC will speak to TEO to ask if they have been in similar situation, and how they managed seeking refunds if the group were not replying to their correspondence.

ACTION: For the next meeting of the Committee, the following actions regarding the grant refund should be compiled; Who correspondence was sent to from the group; A timeline of the correspondence and examples; Details on what the next steps are in closing down this issue.

If no progress is made before the next Committee meeting, the Committee will consider whether an official letter to the group should be sent on the Committee's and Chair's behalf; Following this CRC will speak to TEO to ask if they have been in similar situation, and how they managed seeking refunds if the group were not replying to their correspondence.

The Committee thanked Mr H George for presenting and noted the report.

9. Gifts and Hospitality Guidance

Ms H George presented the Committee with a new CRC Gifts and Hospitality Policy. The change to the current policy came about following correspondence from TEO on 28th May stating that the new policy must be implemented by all TEO departments and their ALBs.

Ms H George took the Board through the key changes to the policy, which include:

- Business Cases must be drafted for the purchases of all gifts and hospitality, regardless of value
- CRC are reminded to consider the use of virtual meetings as a means of minimising hospitality costs
- Hospitality cannot be provided to meetings with only CRC staff in attendance
- Provision of lunch at official Committees/Board meetings/other ad hoc meetings, will only be accepted where it is impossible to accommodate the meeting outside of lunch time, and where attendees cannot reasonably be expected to leave the premises and obtain lunch elsewhere
- For non-residential full day sessions, morning tea and coffee can be provided.
- CRC's office should be considered as a first choice of venue to reduce the costs.

The Committee expressed their disappointment with the new Policy, as CRC's hospitality costs are nominal, and where there are costs, these are usually associated with TEO TBUC Engagement Forums which CRC run on behalf of the Department. The Committee approved the draft as TEO have made it mandatory for all ALBs. The CEO assured the Committee that she would raise their views with TEO at the next Accountability and Liaison meeting.

10. Annual Fair Employment Monitoring

In the absence of the HR Manager, the CEO presented the Committee with CRC's 2024/25 Annual Fair Employment Monitoring Forum, which was circulated with the papers ahead of this meeting.

The form sets out CRC's staffing figures and was compiled and submitted to ECNI on 9th May 2025 by Ms J Adamson.

The Committee noted the report and thanked the CEO for presenting it.

11. Staffing Update

In the absence of the HR Manager, the CEO presented the Committee with an update on CRC's current staffing position, a report on which was provided to members in the papers for the meeting.

The new DFAP Directorate structure is working well and will be reviewed at year end or earlier if necessary.

The recent campaign to recruit a new Finance Manager was unsuccessful, with no applications being made. The CEO informed the Committee that a further recruitment exercise will be conducted when the Pay Remits have been implemented and CRC staff salaries are in line with NICS.

The 2024/25 and 2025/26 Pay Remits have been submitted along with the Board Pay Remits. The CEO thanked Mr P Garrity for the huge amount of work that went into this submission. CRC awaits the outcome.

Ms G Attwood returned to work at CRC following her secondment at the beginning of April. She has quickly settled back in and is already demonstrating the skills that CRC missed in her absence.

The Funding team currently have a temporary agency worker assisting with the CR/CD grants. At the end of June she will be moved to the Vouching team to assist with the 2024/25 year close down. The CEO assured the Committee that she will not be vouching any CRCD grants and will only work on Core and North Belfast, to ensure the separation of responsibilities is maintained. The cost of this agency worker has already been accrued into 2024/25 as she is working purely on year-end close down. This temporary support will be reviewed monthly.

Board members have now received their second term letters. Three board members are due to leave at the end of November 2025. In addition to this CRC has been advised that due to work commitments one other Board member will be leaving on 1st July 2025, and another in December 2025. At the recent Accountability and Liaison meeting TEO notified CRC that they have yet to begin the recruitment exercise to appoint new members. They asked CRC to check with those members who are due to leave at the end of the year, if they would consider staying on until the recruitment of new members is complete. Mr M McDonell and Ms A Simpson both agreed that they would stay on until new members are recruited. The Chair and CEO expressed their appreciation to these members. This question will be asked at the next Board meeting to other members due to leave at the end of the year.

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

12. Pension Business Case

The CEO updated the Board on the status of CRC's Pension Business Case. She reminded the Committee that TEO proposed CRC seek a temporary agency worker to complete the Business Case. This has been unsuccessful so far but remains open with the agencies.

At the Chair's Appraisal meeting with TEO, and at a recent Accountability and Liaison meeting TEO stated that they would explore whether a member of the Strategic Investment Board team would be able to assist with the completion of the Business Case. CRC have not yet received an update from TEO on this option.

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

13. Health and Safety

Ms H George informed the Committee that a test of CRC's Service Continuity Plan was conducted on 31st May 2025.

Recovery of systems was achieved within 28 minutes, quicker than the 60min goal. The test result saw all 9 actions passing and no recommendations being made to CRC.

The Committee thanked Ms H George for this update.

14. Premises Committee

Ms H George informed the Committee that a Business Case will be presented at the next Board meeting setting out a plan to procure IT Service assistance, when the current contract comes to an end in September. The Business Case recommends a 7 year contract, with a break clause after two years and then after another two years. This will see the contract align with the proposed Equality House lease extension.

The CEO added that new assurance requirements have been placed on IT Service providers who bid for this contract, however, those same assurance requirements are not yet in place with the NICS current IT provision.

The Committee thanked Ms H George and the CEO for this update.

15. Any Other Business

None

16. Date of Next Meeting

To be confirmed