

**MINUTES OF THE TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FOURTH MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY
RELATIONS COUNCIL BOARD HELD ON 10th December 2025 at 2PM ONLINE**

4363/26 **Present:** Mr M McDonald (Chair), Mr J McCallister, Ms N Tandon, Ms C Harris, Mr M McDonnell, Ms S McClelland, Ms A Simpson.

4364/26 **In Attendance:** Dr J Irwin (CEO), Mr B McDonald (Director of Funding), Mr P Day (Director of Engagement), Ms J Adamson (HR Manager), Ms K Pieteron (Core Funding Officer), Mr P Garrity (Temporary Finance Manager), Ms H George (Governance, Admin & Assistant Finance Manager).

4365/26 **Observers:** None

4366/26 **Apologies:** Mr R Campbell

4367/26 **Welcome**

The Chair, Board and CEO welcomed Ms A Simpsons back to the Board after her period of illness.

4349/26 **Standard Checks**

No conflicts of interest were raised, and no gifts have been received.

4350/26 **Minutes**

The minutes of the previous meeting were reviewed and approved.

4351/26 **Matters Arising**

The CEO presented the Board with correspondence, related to a matter which arose at the last meeting. As requested the CEO had asked TEO if a member of the team could present on the Public Accountability Bill at a future meeting of the Board. TEO responded to say that a representative from the policy team was not available on the date of the next board meeting but will be in touch if the March date becomes available.

4352/26 **Correspondence**

The CEO presented the Board with three items of correspondence:

i) December Monitoring Allocation

The first item of correspondence from TEO sets out CRC's new grant in aid following the December Monitoring Round and in year allocations. The GIA value is now £3,304k.

ii) Board Appointments

The second correspondence follows a meeting that TEO held with the Chair and CEO. At this meeting TEO asked if those Board members due to end their shorter second terms in April 2026 would consider staying on for a full term until May 2027, to align with the other Board members. The CEO wrote to those Board members affected. Mr R Campbell, Ms Audrey Simpson, and Mr M McDonnell all agreed to stay on. Following the confirmation going back to TEO, Ms S McClelland confirmed prior to the Board meeting to the Chair that she is content to stay on as well. Ms S McClelland's confirmation will be shared with TEO following this meeting. If Ministers decide to approve this option, the issue of no longer having staggering appointments in line with the guidance issued by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (i.e. all Board members leaving at the same time) will have to be discussed with TEO.

As there is not yet confirmation of these extension, CRC will await further correspondence from TEO to confirm and follow up correspondence from Ministers will be needed.

The CEO thanked Board members for responding quickly to this request from TEO and for agreeing to this further potential extension of their term.

iii) Community Relations/Cultural Diversity Refund

The CEO reminded the Board that in November 2025 the Chair wrote to an organisation who received a CR/CD grant in 2023/24 but did not use the funds for the project proposed, and which now owes CRC the repayment of that grant. The group wrote back to ask for a deadline extension to the end of December 2025, which was granted. The refund was not received before this date. The Chair wrote to the group again, stating that the deadline had passed and the issue would be discussed again at an upcoming Board meeting. The correspondence in today's papers includes the group's response, asking for a further extension to the 31st January 2026. The CEO added that, to date, the payment has still not been made.

The Board discussed and agreed to extend the deadline to the 31st January.

If the payment is not received by this date CRC will seek further advice from TEO on the next steps.

4353/26

Chair's Update

The Chair met with TEO on 12th December to discuss a skills audit related to the upcoming Board recruitment. TEO requested a follow up meeting with the Chair and CEO on 15th January where, as the CEO has already informed the Committee, TEO asked whether a further extension of four Board members terms, if offered, would be accepted.

The Chair held a prep session for the Board meeting with the CEO and Ms H George on 21st January.

The Chair added that, at the Evaluation session, it was agreed that the ARAC verbal update, the Finance & General Purposes Committee update, and the Funding Sub-Group updated would be moved up future Board agendas to sit under the Chair's agenda, so that all matters arising from the committees are taken together and given the discussion in the round that they require.

ACTION: Ms H George to update future Board agendas to move all Committee and Sub-Group Chair verbal updates under the Chair's Update.

4544/26 Operational Plan 2026/27

The CEO presented the Board with the first draft of CRC's 2026/27 Operational Plan, which was circulated to members prior to the meeting.

The draft will go to TEO after the Board's approval, for their feedback. Then a second draft will come to the Board at the next meeting.

The CEO reminded the Board that the Operational Plan and its delivery depend on the budget CRC receive in 2026/27, and therefore that section of the Operational Plan will be updated when the allocation letter is received in 2026/27.

The CEO drew the Board's attention to three substantial additions to the Operational Plan. While CRC await the outcome of the TBUC Review, in the policy vacuum, the SMT have been working on three development papers. One on the funding landscape, one on the idea of Centre of Excellence, and one on a proposal to pilot projects that model joined up networking of good relations organisations. These papers will be presented to the Board at the next meeting.

The Operational Plan includes the next phase of the Social Value measurement project, which will analyse the findings of social value reviews of up to five Core Funded groups.

The Chair stated that the Operational Plan was discussed at the Evaluation session. The Board agreed that they should move forward to work on a Strategy, in the absence of a TBUC Review Report. They agreed that CRC should pursue funding from other sources. The CEO agreed and stated that these suggestions already form part of the three development papers being produced.

The Board approved the draft to be submitted to TEO for feedback. Any changes to the Operational Plan will be considered as part of the second review in March.

4545/26 CEO's Update

The CEO updated the Board on a number of matters which are included in her CEO Report, circulated to members ahead of this meeting.

i) Events

CRC will be hosting the District Council Good Relations Officer conference on Thursday 29th January. This event is an opportunity to talk to the Councils about their convening and networking power, as well as a presentation on fact checking.

With the Core Fund Assessment meeting due to take place in the next month, the CEO reminded members to avoid any real or perceived conflicts of interest with groups whose applications are currently under review.

The Good Relations Awards will be presented at the upcoming TBUC Engagement Forum, taking place on 24th March. She thanked Board members for their assistance scoring the awards and the Engagement Team for their work on this project.

ii) External Meetings

The CEO and Mr P Day attended a meeting with the new Director of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. The Office is currently carrying out a series of engagement meetings with stakeholders. Once they have identified their stakeholders there is an opportunity to bring them all together. Their staff team includes one secondee from TEO, who will provide support while they are getting set up.

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

4546/26

Good Relations Week Evaluation and Recommendations

Mr P Day presented the Board with an Evaluation of Good Relations Week 2025, which was circulated ahead of this meeting.

The Week hosted a record number of events, with positive feedback about the change of date.

Coming from the Evaluation was a series of recommendations for the team to consider.

Recommendation one suggests that the programme would benefit from a budget increase, to address the rising costs in digital advertising and ambassador fees. Mr P Day stated that the budget for the Week is dependent on CRC's own budget allocation from TEO. If additional resource is available in 2026/27 then budget may be allocated to pieces of work in support of the Week.

Two recommendations related to updating the registration process were accepted and will be implemented in 2026.

A recommendation to explore further was the suggestion to integrate a high-profile ambassador into the activities, and to host a flagship event in Good Relations Week. This recommendation would likely lead to additional costs, therefore the team are considering no cost options instead.

The team accepted a recommendation to target influencers from various demographics to assist with the campaign.

The team are considering further a recommendation to link with additional media partners. The team will need to consider any additional costs this may incur.

A recommendation to onboard a dedicated content creator was rejected as it would likely be cost prohibitive.

Recommendations to host a dedicated launch event and to keep the new October date were accepted. However, a recommendation to expand the festival to cover an entire month has been marked for further consideration. Feedback shows that the programme hosted over one week, as well as the Good Relations Week branding is very strong, and the team would need to consider that this may be impacted by expanding to a month-long programme.

The Board agreed with the decisions related to accepting and rejecting these recommendations. They proposed that the Engagement Team should consider whether it would be possible to engage representatives of the business community in this year's Good Relations Week.

4547/26 Good Relations Week 2026 Business Case

Mr P Day presented the Board with a Business Case setting out the options and rationale for Good Relations Week 2026 cost. The Business Case recommends an investment of £29,999 in this year's festival.

The Board approved the Business Case.

Mr P Day thanked the Board and informed them that he will now begin this procurement exercise.

4547/26 Engagement Report

Mr P Day presented the Board with an update on the work of the Engagement Team.

The Good Relations Awards 2026 closed to nominations on 19th January 2026. 77 nominations were made, with a good spread across the categories. The Chair, Ms N Tandon and Mr J McCallister will sit on the decision panel, which will meet in early February. Videos will be produced on each of the winners and a presentation of the awards will take place on 24th March.

The awards presentation will form part of the next TBUC Engagement Forum which will take place on the 24th March. TEO and CRC are discussing a potential theme for this event.

Feedback from the recent Making a Difference Conference included the suggestion that CRC host lunchtime learning sessions. The team are exploring how to take this recommendation forward.

Mr P Day updated the Board on the Social Value project. The pilot project will conclude in March 2026, and reports will be produced on the social value of 5 core

funded groups. CRC has acquired a licence for this software and will be able to produce reports like this for all Core groups in the future.

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

4548/26 2026/27 Core Fund Applicant Ineligibility Decision

Ms K Pieteron presented the Board with a paper related to the recent Core Fund ineligibility checks.

She explained that a human error occurred, and a group that had provided required documents had their application marked as missing these documents, and therefore their application was marked as ineligible.

The learning from this experience has been noted which will ensure it does not happen in the future.

The Board approved the group's application to be marked as 'eligible' and to now go through for a full assessment.

The Board accepted the explanation provided, agreed that this was a human error, and noted that steps have been taken to ensure that it does not happen again.

4549/26 Funding Report

Mr B McDonald updated the Board on CRC's funding schemes.

The 2026/27 Core Fund application review is underway. There are 40 applications undergoing a full assessment, following the eligibility checks. Mr B McDonald proposed that the Board scoring meeting could take place on the 11th March ahead of the full Board meeting.

The Community Relations/Cultural Diversity programme, due to the additional in-year resource provided by TEO, will now be able to stay open to applications until the 27th March. There are currently approximately £45k worth of applications under review by Project Officers.

The 2025/26 North Belfast Strategic Good Relations Programme is currently projecting a large underspend, and potential accrual. One group who have a large projected underspend, are being pursued by CRC and TEO to decommit these funds, so they can be distributed within this grant scheme.

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

4550/26 Non Consolidated Payments to 2025/26 Core Fund Groups

The 2025/26 Core Fund is projected very little underspend. Due to the in-year resource from TEO becoming available and the outcome of the December Monitoring Round, CRC have additional funds to support Core Funded groups.

Mr B McDonald asked the Board to consider a non-consolidated payment to go to each of the 2025/26 Core Funded groups, up to a value of £4k. This would involve groups claiming an additional £4k through their next vouching claim on non-salary related expenditure. CRC have been in a position in the last few years to provide this additional resource to groups, and are in that position again in 2025/26.

The Board approved the additional non-consolidated payment of up to £4k being awarded to each of the Core Fund groups.

4551/26 Closure of Bank Account

Ms H George reminded the Board that over a year ago CRC were included as a named body in a Department of Finance collaborative arrangement for the provision of banking services. This contract was awarded to Danske Bank. CRC's new account went live on the 1st October, and following a period of transition, the new arrangements are working well, and the account is fully functional.

The Board are now being asked, as signatories of the Bank of Ireland account, to request the closure of this account.

The Board approved the closure of the Bank of Ireland account.

4552/26 Audit Fees Purchase Order

Ms H George presented the Board with a purchase order for the Northern Ireland Audit Office fees for the completion of the 2025/26 audit. The fee for this exercise will be £23,300. This sees a small increase of 4% on last years fee.

The Board approved this Purchase Order.

4553/26 Grant Management System Purchase Order

Ms H George presented the Board with a purchase order for the 2026 fee for the grant management system. The fee totals £21,132.

Ms H George assured the Board that this fee relates to the current contract with the service providers, procurement for which was completed in 2024. Mr P Garrity added that this fee reflects what was set out in the contract and mirrors the 2025 payment.

The Board approved the Purchase Order.

4554/26 December 2025 Management Accounts

Mr P Garrity presented the Board with the December 2025 Management Accounts, along with a summary of the financial position.

There is a current favourable variance of £7,679 in the accounts. This is due to savings in the judicial review budget along with the salaries.

CRC bid for £25k in the December Monitoring Round for assistance to complete the Pension Business Case. This was awarded to CRC, and TEO approved the virement of that resource to grants, as it would not be spent in year.

CRC also received additional in-year resource from TEO of £56k for Core Fund, and £60k for CRCD grant. This has now increased CRC's 2025/26 resource allocation to £3,342k. CRC's projected spend is £3,321k, which would mean a £21k underspend, representing 0.63% of the budget. Well within the 1.5% tolerance.

To date £1.74m has been paid on grants.

In December 2025 Mr P Garrity responded to further queries from TEO on the 2024/25 and 2025/26 Pay Remits. All response were sent and there are currently no outstanding queries. The Pay Remit Business Case is now with TEO for approval. The next back-pay payments will also include the 'No Better No Worse Off' payments to staff not in receipt of the 6% uplift. These have been accounted for in the Pay Remit submissions, and provisions for payment have already been included in the accounts.

The Board thanked Mr P Garrity for this update and all the work it represents and noted the Reports.

4555/26 Staffing Update

Ms J Adamson provided the Board with a verbal update on CRC's staffing position.

In the absence of a permanent Finance Manager, Mr P Garrity continues to provide cover for this role.

In the absence of a DFAP Director, Ms H George continues to cover the governance tasks and works closely with the Finance Manager on relevant finance tasks.

The Board thanked Ms J Adamson for this update.

4556/26 Pension Business Case Update

Ms J Adamson provided the Board with a verbal update on the position of the Pension Business Case.

TEO had been in contact with the Strategic Investment Board, on CRC's behalf, to enquire as to whether they would be able to assist with the completion of the Business Case. SIB stated that they would not have capacity to assist with this in 2025/26. TEO were to go back to SIB and ask if they could assist in 2026/27. CRC await TEO's update.

In relation to the Business Case itself, it will be reviewed in light of TEO's approval of the 'No Better No Worse Off' payments in the normal Pay-Remit process. They were previously included as an option in the Pension Business Case, and therefore can now be removed.

The Board thanked Ms J Adamson for this update.

4557/26 Any Other Business

i) CRCD

Mr B McDonald asked Board members who are out at events or speaking with groups, to remind them that the CRCD grant will remain open to applications until the end of March 2026.

ii) T&S Forms

Mr P Garrity reminded the Board that, as we approach year end, it is important that members return any outstanding T&S forms to ensure payments are made in year, and that a large accrual is not carried into 2026/27 for the 2025/26 year.

4558/26 Date of Next Meeting

11th March 2026 – full day meeting