

**MINUTES OF THE TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIFTH MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY
RELATIONS COUNCIL BOARD HELD ON 11TH MARCH 2026, 10:30AM, IN CRC'S OFFICE.**

- 4559/26** **Present:** Mr M McDonald (Chair), Mr J McCallister, Ms N Tandon, Ms C Harris, Ms A Simpson, Mr R Campbell.
- 4560/26** **In Attendance:** Dr J Irwin (CEO), Mr B McDonald (Director of Funding), Mr P Day (Director of Engagement), Ms J Adamson (HR Manager), Mr P Garrity (Temporary Finance Manager), Ms H George (Governance, Admin & Assistant Finance Manager).
- 4561/26** **Observers:** None
- 4562/26** **Apologies:** Mr M McDonnell, Ms S McClelland
- 4563/26** **Welcome**
- 4564/26** **Standard Checks**
- 4565/26** **Minutes**
- 4566/26** **Matters Arising**
- 4567/26** **Correspondence**
- i) Operational Plan 2026/27

After the approval of the first draft of 2026/27 Operational Plan by the Board at the January meeting, the CEO shared the draft with TEO for their feedback. Feedback was received on Friday 6th March.

The only substantial proposed amendment by TEO was for the Outcome One title to change from: 'Strengthening good community relationships in the context of the Programme for Government missions for Peace, People, Planet and Prosperity' to: 'Strengthening good community relationships in the context of the Programme for Government missions for People, Planet and Prosperity, and the cross cutting commitment to Peace'.

The CEO added that, the three development areas did not receive any comment from TEO.

The remainder of the suggested amendments were noted and the Board approved the updated draft, which will now be submitted to TEO again awaiting the addition of the budget for the year.

The CEO informed the Board that TEO has recently gained a new, Interim Permanent Secretary, Ms M Doherty. The Chair will now write to Ms Doherty to welcome her to her new position and ask for a meeting.

ACTION: Chair to write to new TEO Interim Permanent Secretary, welcoming her to her new position, and asking for a meeting.

The Board thanked the CEO for this update.

i) Pay Remit

On 10th March CRC received correspondence from TEO regarding the sign off of the 2024/25 and 2025/26 Pay Remits. TEO provided CRC with conditional approval of the Remits, on the condition that CRC agree to their timeline for completing the Pension Business Case: “This conditional approval is subject to the business case being progressed in a timely way (see milestones below), that this is monitored closely, and any slippage, emerging concerns, or further delay are escalated to TEO’s Accounting Officer promptly”

TEO require CRC and SIB to engage on the business case from March 2026 to May 2026. They ask that SIB produce a completed draft by the end of June 2026, and that a draft business case be submitted to TEO in July 2026.

The Board considered the timeline, noting that if there is any slippage or emerging concerns about the timeline, that CRC will be able to notify TEO’s Accounting Officer.

The Board agreed the timeline.

The Board discussed the budget in relation to this work, and noted that when TEO previously advised that SIB would not be able to complete the work in 2025/26 the budget, with TEO’s approval, was veered to grants. A conversation will need to be had with SIB and TEO to identify whether additional budget will be provided to cover this work in 2026-27. Any work completed in 2025-26 should be possible to cover from in-year remaining funds.

In addition, the Board asked for clarity on whether SIB will be in contract with TEO or CRC to complete this work, whether a contract has been signed, and for an Information Sharing Agreement to be completed with SIB before any data can be shared.

ACTION: Feedback from Board discussion on SIB Pension Business Case work to be relayed at the upcoming meeting.

Once the meeting with SIB is complete and the work has begun, CRC’s Board’s Pension Sub Group will be convened to oversee this work.

Mr P Garrity thanked the Board for their approval, and explained that, now that the Pay Remits have been approved, staff will be placed on their correct pay scales for the March pay run, and any backpay will be processed in April 2026.

The Board thanked Mr P Garrity for his work on this.

4568/26 Board Evaluation Session Notes

The Chair reminded members that a closed meeting was held on 27th January for Board members to complete an evaluation. The Chair noted that this was a good session with a number of actions arising. These actions included: proceeding with Strategic Planning Session; share feedback with TEO on the Board's views on their relationship with the Department; Sub-Group/Committee verbal updates to be moved up the agenda at Board meetings; CRC to engage in NI Festivals – consider taking out stalls at the Mela etc; Board to work with comms to broaden GR Weeks reach.

The Board thanked the Chair for leading this session and agreed the proposed actions.

4569/26 Chair's Update

i) Chair of Board Verbal Update

The Chair updated the Board on a number of meetings and events attended, following the last Board meeting.

On 4th February 2026 a meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee took place online.

On 9th February the Chair attended the Good Relations Awards Assessment Panel.

On 28th February the Chair met with Mr C Gardner, TEO, on a confidential issue and to discuss the Board terms. Mr C Gardner stated at this meeting that they are still awaiting an update from Ministers regarding the Board members extensions. The Chair informed TEO that CRC's Board plan to organise a meeting to discuss the next Strategic Plan, in the absence of the TBUC Review outcome.

The Chair attended CRC's Funding Sub-Group on 4th March.

In advance of the Core Fund Decision session to take place following this meeting, the Chair thanked Mr B McDonald and his staff for their work reviewing the assessments.

ii) F&GP Verbal Update

The Chair provided the Board with a verbal update on the most recent Finance and General Purposes Committee meeting, which took place on 4th February 2026.

The Committee received CRC's Quarter Three Performance Report and Business Plan updates. These reports included a summary of the red and ambers risks, financial position, the sick leave statistics, staffing position, along with the list of achievements in the quarter.

The Committee reviewed and approved updates to the Data Protection Policy and Procedures, the Vouching and Verification Procedures and Checklist, and the Financial Procedures Manual.

Ms J Adamson presented the Committee with a paper updating on the outcome of the Health and Safety Audit of CRC's premises. The audit found standard health and safety to be generally satisfactory.

The sickness absence statistics were presented at this meeting and show an increase in the number of sick days compared with the same period last year. This can be attributed to one member of staff off on long term sick. That member of staff has now returned to work.

The Committee were informed that CRC will soon undertake an audit of inequalities, which should align with the production of the next Strategic Plan.

Ms J Adamson updated the Committee on the current IT Contract. The work of the contract holders has been satisfactory over the quarter.

iii) CRCD Refund

During the Finance and General Purposes Committee meeting, members were informed that, after a further extension to the repayment of the CRCD grant, the group have still not provided the refund. The Committee asked for a meeting request to go to the group. The meeting request was emailed on 9th February, however, no acknowledgement of the email or response has been received.

The Board discussed this issue and agreed the following next steps:

- Mr B McDonald to go back to TEO to inform them that CRC have exhausted all internal avenues for pursuing this refund. Ask TEO if they or DoF need anything further from CRC before the next steps.
- Once CRC receive a response from TEO, CRC to write to the group again to notify them that the failure to refund had been notified to The Executive Office and would be recorded in the annual report, and as a consequence of not repaying this grant, the group would be ineligible to apply/receive any funding from CRC in the future.
- The accounting for this will then be completed.

The Board agreed this approach.

iv) ARAC

Mr J McCallister provided a verbal update to the Board on the last Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, which took place on 25th February.

The Committee received the 2025/26 Audit Strategy from NIAO. The fee for this year's work will be £23,300, a small increase on the previous year.

The Internal Audit report of Financial Controls was presented to the Committee. One Priority Three recommendation to review the finance file structure to reduce the duplication of processes was made. One Priority Two recommendation to provide staff with guidance and training on financial processes was made.

The Terms of Reference for IT Controls audit is currently with the Committee for review and approval. This work will take place in March, and a review of Grants Administration will take place in April.

A paper was presented to the Committee on Cyber Security Risk. This paper covered the cyber security environment, the arrangements within CRC, and the reporting requirements of the current Cyber Security Firm. The report showed that CRC'S Cyber Security Risk is well mitigated due to the oversight of Cyber Security NI, Ms E Tomasso, and Ms J Adamson.

The Committee reviewed the risk register. Pension Business Case risk remains rated red. Staffing risk remains rated red, however, the mitigations continue to work well. The NILGSOC risk remains rated amber, as there have been no recent updates on the case. The 2025/26 Resource risk was downgraded from amber to green, as the additional resources provided by TEO have ensured CRC are in a strong position coming into year end. Board Members Terms risk remains rated amber. CRC still await an update from TEO on their proposal to extend further the terms of those members due to leave in April 2026.

The Committee discussed one outstanding audit recommendation, for Board members to receive refresher training on governance and risk. Originally it was agreed that this recommendation would be implemented when the new Board is in place. However, the Committee now agreed that, if their terms are extended to 2027 then this training should be moved up to take place in 2026.

The Board thanked the Chair and Mr J McCallister for these updates.

4570/26 CEO's Update

The CEO thanked Ms H George for her preparations for this meeting, and all the staff for their work during her bereavement absence.

The Chair thanked Ms H George , Ms J Adamson and other staff for their assistance over this period.

4571/26 Good Relations Week Purchase Order

Ms P Day provided the Board with an update on the Good Relations Week procurement. Three bids were made, and the panel met and reviewed the bids in February. A Purchase Order was presented to the Board with details of the winning bid.

The Board reviewed the Purchase Order and agreed the total of £26,950.

4572/26 Engagement Update

Mr P Day provided the Board with an update on the work of the Engagement team.

Mr P Day stated that the Good Relations Award nominations had been reviewed and scored by a panel in February 2026. He thanked Ms N Tandon, Mr J McCallister and the Chair for their involvement in these assessments.

The Good Relations Awards will be presented at the TBUC Engagement Forum on 24th March. Board members presence at this event would be greatly appreciated.

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

4573/26 Funding Update

Mr B McDonald provided the Board with an update on the work of the Funding Team.

The North Belfast Grant Business Case has still not been signed off by TEO and the outcome of their review has not been shared yet. While this is awaited adnt o avoid delays, CRC have issued the grant applications to groups on the scheme but will issue contracts only when the underpinning authority of the Business Case is approved.

The Community Relations/Cultural Diversity Grant has now closed to applications as the full budget has now been allocated. £175K has been awarded to over 60 projects. When the scheme closed there were applications in progress worth around £30k that could not be supported. This will be fed back to TEO following the Core Fund meeting today.

The CEO added that the additional money CRC would require to fund these extra CRCD awards as well as the Core Fund applicants that scored above the fundable threshold, but below the resource threshold, would be a relatively small amount for money for TEO, and would make a huge difference to these groups and achieve a lot if provided to CRC at the beginning of the year, rather

than in the final quarter. TEO will be notified of the amount after the Core Fund Assessment panel meets today.

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

4574/26 Management Accounts

Mr P Garrity presented the Board with the February 2026 Management Accounts.

The Report shows a current £66k favourable variance to the projected budget. This is due to timing issues with grant payments and TEO's overallocation of resources to salaries.

CRC is projected to end the year with £14k underspend, which represents 0.43% of the budget, well within the 1.5% tolerance. Mr P Garrity does expect this underspend to reduce over the next month.

The Grant In Aid for 2025/26 sits at £3304k, and spend will come in exactly at that.

The Pay Remit provisions have already been made in the accounts.

CRC expect a 45% cap in cash spend in 2026/27 therefore the team are working to ensure that there are no unnecessary accruals at year end, and that invoices are paid in March 2026.

The Board thanked Mr P Garrity for all the work that he does.

4575/26 Staffing Update

Ms J Adamson updated the Board on CRC's staffing situation.

CRC recently procured an agency worker to assist with the vouching and year end verification work.

The Board thanked Ms J Adamson for this update.

4576/26 Finance and General Purposes Committee Minutes

The Board noted the minutes of the October 2025 minutes.

4577/26 Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Minutes

The Board noted the minutes of the November 2026 minutes.

4578/26 Any Other Business

None

4579/26

Date of Next Meeting

29th April 2026 11am