

Community Relations Council
Finance and General Purposes Committee
29th November 10am
Held Online

1. **Present:** Mr M McDonald (Chair), Ms A Simpson (Board Member), Mr M McDonnell (Board Member), Ms N Tandon (Board Member)
2. **In Attendance:** Dr J Irwin (CEO), Ms J Adamson (HR Manager), Mr B McDonald (Vouching and Verification Officer), Ms S McMenamin (Finance Manager), Ms H George (PA to CEO and Board).
3. **Apologies:** None

4. Minutes

The minutes of the 28th June 2022 Finance and General Purposes Committee meeting were reviewed and approved.

5. Matters Arising

All matters arising will be dealt with under other agenda items.

6. Conflicts of Interest

None were raised.

7. Quarter Two Delivery Report 2022/23

The CEO presented the Committee with CRC's Delivery Report for the period of July to September 2022.

She highlighted that CRC are on schedule to complete all outcomes by the end of the financial year.

The Chair thanked staff for their work over this quarter, and in particular those who have taken on extra responsibility in the absence of a Finance, Admin and Personnel Director.

Jacqueline added that two features of this period have been the lack of Government Ministers and, as a result, the budget implications.

The Board noted the report and commended CRC on the achievements.

8. Management Accounts

Ms S McMenamin, Finance Manager, presented the Committee with CRC's Management Accounts up to 31st October 2022.

She highlighted to the Committee that CRC's budget for the year is £3.332million. There is currently a projected underspend, mainly in salaries, due to the DFAP Director role being

unfilled. A candidate was found during a recent recruitment process, and she will begin work at CRC on 9th January 2023. The DFAP Team are working to ensure full spend is achieved.

The Committee asked whether the salary underspend could be used in other budget lines and whether it would have to be spend by 31st March 2023.

The CEO explained that CRC report spend and projected spend every month, and would notify TEO of the move of budget from salaries to grants. Mr P Jordan, Director of Funding and Development has completed an exercise to identify groups who were awarded grants, but at reduced rate than requested, due to CRC's resources at the beginning of the year. He is speaking to groups to ascertain whether they could spend any additional resources by 31st March 2023.

The Committee thanks Ms S McMenamin for presenting and noted this paper.

9. Capital Grant Charges

Ms H George reminded the Committee of an issue CRC received correspondence on earlier in the year.

In 2006/07-2008/09 CRC administered Peace Funding and ran one Capital Grant fund where groups could bid for resources to build or upgrade premises. Nine groups received this funding.

As part of the award, a charge was placed to ensure that the buildings funded were not sold on by the groups within an unreasonable period.

The Capital Grant was moved across, along with all Peace Funds, to the Special EU Programmes Body. CRC sent all the paperwork relating to these grant to SEUPB, however, due to their file retention policy, the files for these grants have been destroyed.

CRC were contacted in 2022 by three of these groups asking for their charges to be removed.

As CRC is an Arm's Length Body of The Executive Office, the final decision on the charge is made there. TEO is working on the resolution, which will need to be authorised by the Permanent Secretary.

TEO submitted a proposal to the Permanent Secretary in November. A follow up question was submitted to SEUPB regarding the potential for EU Clawback under the terms of the PEACE ii contract and are waiting for a response.

The Committee will be kept up to date on any further developments.

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

10. Vouching and Verification Progress Report

Mr B McDonald, Vouching and Verification Officer, presented the Committee with a report updating on CRC's grant position up to November 2022.

He informed the Committee that almost all of the 2021/22 Core Fund final payments have been made. One group is currently under investigation by TEO so all funding has been suspended.

The first payments for Core Fund 2022/23 have been made, apart from two groups who are new to the scheme and have not completed their verifications. This is due to be completed by the end of the month.

CRC have now received assurances from TEO on the resources for the North Belfast Strategic Good Relations Fund, therefore, first payments for this grant will be made in December 2022.

Mr B McDonald added that the vouching and verification forms have been slim lined to ensure they are as useful as they can be to the groups and the DFAP team. A review will be completed by the team on how to make further efficiencies in the next year.

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

11. Staffing Update

The Chair welcomed Ms J Adamson back following recent leave.

Ms J Adamson provided the Committee with an update on CRC's current staffing situation.

She informed the Committee that CRC recently appointed a candidate to the DFAP Director position. She will begin work on 9th January 2023, and will begin her induction programme that week.

The CEO added that CRC had a good pool of applicants during this recruitment process, following the previous unsuccessful process.

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

The Committee asked whether CRC would have an incentive or 'thank you' resource that could be given to staff who have worked hard and acted up over the last year. Other organisations are able to provide staff with a trivial gift as a sign of their appreciation. The Committee agreed to raise this for discussion at the upcoming Board meeting. In the meantime CRC would research whether there is provision for this within the 'Managing Public Money' guidance.

ACTION: CRC to review whether there is a provision for 'gifts/appreciation allowances' within the Managing Public Money guidance.

12. Sickness Absence Report

Ms J Adamson presented the Committee with CRC's Sickness Absence Report up to 30th September 2022.

Compared with the previous year, there has been a significant decrease in short term and long-term sickness absence leading to a decrease in the total cost. The total cost of sickness decreased by almost £16K and the total days lost per person has decreased from 5.6 days to 1.1 days.

The CEO added that a member of CRC's Engagement Team is currently off on sick leave, following an operation. She and the Committee sent their best wishes for a speedy recovery to the staff member.

The Committee noted the report.

13. Microsoft 365 Implementation Update

Ms H George provided the Committee with an update on the progress of CRC's Microsoft 365 migration.

CRC have begun the process of moving all systems to the cloud, through Microsoft 365. The first two stages are complete. CRC's emails have now moved online, and the telephony is now conducted through Microsoft Teams.

The final stage of the process will involve moving CRC's files from the server onto Microsoft SharePoint and Teams. CRC are currently conducting a review of the file retention policy, to identify files due for disposal. Once the files have been cleared CRC will work with ECNI's IT department to ensure that the current file system is compatible with the cloud system.

A successful test of the compatibility of the structure took place this weekend for the DFAP Team folder.

The input of the new DFAP Director will be needed to ensure the new layout is useful to her, therefore the next steps will not be completed until after the New Year.

The Committee thanked Ms H George for this update.

14. Health & Safety Update

Ms J Adamson provided the Committee with an update on health and safety at CRC's office.

She assured the Committee that no health and safety issues have been raised with HR. Staff have the opportunity to do so at all Staff Meetings and team meetings.

An audit of health and safety will be completed in the New Year, along with a fire risk assessment, and a Display Screen Assessment.

The Committee asked whether CRC's staff have mandatory office attendance policy, whether there are days every week that staff are required to be in the office.

The CEO reminded the Committee of the approved Agile Working Policy, which was agreed by the Committee and the Board in January 2022. The policy does not require staff to attend the office for a specific number of days a week/month. Staff and Teams are able to make that decision themselves. Many staff are meeting in the office for their monthly and weekly Team meetings, and external meetings. The current government guidance does not specify a requirement for staff to return to the office for a certain number of days, CRC will continue to follow the government guidance.

The CEO added that decisions about attending the office are based on business need, wellbeing of staff and their dependents, and whether the journey is worth the expense.

The Committee suggested that a review of the Agile Policy take place in the New Year.

ACTION: A review of the Agile Working Policy to take place in 2023.

The Committee thanked Ms J Adamson for this update.

15. Premises Committee Update

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

All planned preventative maintenance for the building is up to date and PAT testing will take place in the New Year. Generator testing will also take place in the new year.

A Fire Risk Assessment was completed for Equality House in 2022. ECNI are waiting on this report and will share any update or actions needed with the tenants.

General concern was expressed about anti-social behaviour in the vicinity of Equality House with some recent incidents being discussed. ECNI are going to contact Belfast City Centre Management and PSNI Community Policing to get general safeguarding advice to be distributed to staff.

ECNI IT staff informed the Premises Committee that their firewall had over 100,000 attempts to break it every week. While it was strong, the weakest link is people. ECNI shared some training materials on IT fraud awareness and password protection of documents. HR is going to speak to IT in CRC with a view to having the materials distributed.

ECNI have asked Aramark to develop a pricing model on behalf of wider NICS into the provision of period products in the building. There is a possibility of ECNI taking part in a government trial on this issue. More info to be supplied when known.

The Committee thanked Ms J Adamson for this update.

16. Any Other Business

The Chair raised two items under 'Any Other Business.

i) Board Terms

The Chair raised concerns about the timing of Board terms, and how a staggered approach would ensure that membership of the Committee was never left vulnerable, and that there were always some returning members on the Board.

The current Board's terms will all expire at the same time, and therefore will leave CRC in a position where the whole Board will be replaced by new members at once.

The Committee suggested that if the Board are put forward for second terms, the length of the terms should differ for members. This could be included in the Partnership Agreement

The Chair will seek a meeting with Mr D McMahon, TEO, to raise this issue.

ii) Pay Review of Board and Chair

The Chair stated that the remuneration rate of CRC's chair and the attendance rate of CRC members has not changed since their induction.

This issue has been raised with TEO in the past, however there has been no change.

The Chair suggested raising this in a meeting with Mr D McMahon.

ACTION: The Chair to request a meeting with Mr D McMahon, TEO, to discuss the issue of Board terms and allowances.

17. Date of Next Meeting

March 23