

**MINUTES OF THE TWO HUNDRED AND FORTY SECOUND MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY  
RELATIONS COUNCIL BOARD HELD ON FRIDAY 19TH APRIL 2024 10:30AM  
AT CRC OFFICES.**

**4005/24 Present:** Mr M McDonald (Chair), Mr J McCallister (Board Member), Ms N Tandon (Board Member), Ms A Simpson (Board Member), Mr M McDonnell (Board Member), Ms M Braniff (Board Member)

**4006/24 In Attendance:** Dr J Irwin (CEO), Mr P Day (Engagement Director), Mr B McDonald (Funding Director), Ms N Woodside (EA to CEO and Board).

**4007/24 Observers:** none

**Apologies:** Mr P Garrity (Finance Manager), Ms J Adamson (HR Manager) Mr D Mercer (Boardroom Apprentice).

**4008/24 Standard Checks**

(a) *Members should declare any conflict of interests in any discussions where decisions were required.*

(b) *Members need to register any offers of gifts or hospitality since the last Council meeting*

**4009/24 Welcome**

The chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

**4010/24 Minutes**

Members reviewed the minutes of the 241st meeting of the Board which took place on 8th March 2024. The Board approved these minutes.

**4011/24 Matters Arising**

On the matters arising document, there were two ongoing items – the first relates to notifying Board members about upcoming events and the second one relates to members submitting their expenses claims as soon as possible for financial year 2023-24.

**4012/24 Correspondence**

None.

**4013/24 Chair's Update**

The Chair provided a brief overview of the meetings he had attended since the last board meeting:

The Chair advised the T:BUC Forum that was held at Mossley Mill on 12th March was a great success. The Chair and CEO met with Chris Gardner from TEO around CRC Board appointments on 13th March 2024.

20th March 2024, Core grants assessment prep. meeting

21st March 2024 Core Grants assessments

26th March 2024 Pension sub-group

8th April 2024 Finance and General Purposes Committee

9th April CRC Good Relations Week launch at Girdwood Community Hub. The Chair noted that having Carl Frampton as an ambassador brought fantastic tv and radio coverage to the event. The event was a great success, and the Chair thanked all involved in the lead up and organisation of the overall event.

#### **4014/24 Chief Executive Officer's Update**

The CEO referred members to her report in the Board papers and highlighted the following: CEO advised that there had been no further word on the Programme for Government or the revised T:BUC strategy. CRC is in contact with TEO on the likelihood of these documents coming through anytime soon. The timing may impact CRC's own draft strategy.

In relation to finance CRC does not have a budget yet; but has been advised it could be May before the correspondence is issued. In the absence of the budget CRC has been advised to assume an opening base line which is the same as for 2023/24. If this turns out to be the budget allocation, it will mean another cut in real terms due to pay and prices.

The CEO advised she will come back to Board again if this is the case to review the content of the Operational Plan for 2024-25 as CRC will have to take a more strategic look at what it plans to deliver. CRC balanced its budget by not opening the Pathfinder, Publications and Media grant schemes last year. To repeat this for a second year would be a significant step. However, CRC was able to mitigate for the lack of these schemes using the CR/CD fund. As soon as the budget is clear staff will bring an update to the Board in relation to any necessary mitigations for 2024-25.

The CEO reports the staffing situation is an improving picture, albeit CRC is not yet back to full staffing levels yet. The shortlisting for the Funding Officer post took place on the 11th April and the CEO thanked all who were involved in this process. The CEO also reported that Helen Di Duca, who is on maternity leave has had her baby girl and best wishes were recorded.

Helen's post is currently being filled by Sophie Jones, who had previously worked on a temporary basis in the Vouching and Verification team. She therefore brings knowledge of CRC processes and policies.

Niamh Maguire has started as the new Vouching and Verification Officer. Niamh started at a difficult time as Una was just preparing to leave. Hopefully CRC will have a new Director of DFAP shortly. The CRO thanked Mr Brian McDonald who has been providing professional guidance to Ms Maguire in her role.

The CEO updated members on the progress in relation to the Pension Business Case. The business case was returned to TEO along with the financial working (on the basis of options that were revised in the business case). This was completed by Ms Kelly prior to her departure.

Mr P Garrity will assist as far as possible with any queries received on this, until CRC has a new DFAP director who when in post can take this further. There has been no further communication from TEO since CRC submitted the business case. CRC met with the Union on 26th March 2024 to advise them of the options in the business case. The Union has come back to Ms J Adamson with some queries.

The Union was keen to stress they are not in the negotiations stage at present, this is at clarification stage at present.

The Chair asked the CEO if CRC had a picture of what each option would cost, the CEO advised that in the business case that was submitted by Ms. Kelly there was high level figures only at this stage.

Mrs A Simpson asked the CEO if CRC has a timeline on the recruitment for the DFAP director. The CEO responded advising the job advertisement was published last week and shortlisting will commence after that deadline. In relation to the likelihood of being able to fill the post, the CEO advised the Bard that CRC salaries are not competitive and she was also aware of others with vacancies in the finance departments as the market is competitive at present.

On the 3rd April the CEO met with Ms Paula Bradshaw MLA who is the Chair of the Executive Office Committee. This meeting was due to take place on 7th March 2024 but was cancelled the same day by her office.

Ms Bradshaw advised that the committee will be recommencing presentations from ALBs, and that the committee expects to run a planning day.

In relation to funding the CEO gave a reminder to members that although the assessment process for the Core Funds awards for 24/25 is now complete, the appeals period is still open and caution over potential conflicts of interest remain.

The T:BUC Engagement Forum was held on 12th March. The CEO was pleased to report that Junior Ministers attended, and the CEO thanked the Engagement team for all the work put into organising this event. In relation to the Good Relations Week launch which the CEO was pleased to report was attended by the First and Deputy First Ministers the CEO agreed with the Chair that Carl Frampton was a great choice as Ambassador, as he was inspiring, especially to young people and it was clear from everything he said that good relations is very important to him personally.

The Chair advised that the question-and-answer session with Carl Frampton was successful in bringing out the good relations aspects of his work.

The CEO reported she had met Mrs E Collins, the new Chair of the Parades Commission. The CEO noted that she was invited to a meeting with the Queen Elizabeth II Memorial Committee; this event was held in Mossley Mill in March 2024. Numerous organisations attended and a presentation was given on how the committee plans to reach out to as many people as possible during their work.

The CEO advised that the internal audit work for 2023-24 is almost complete, most of the field work took place week in commencing 11th March 2024. The auditors held a close out meeting with the CEO on 11th April 2024 and in relation to the funding audit with Mr B McDonald on Thursday 18th April 2024. At this stage no issues have arisen, and the reports should go to the next meeting of the Audit and Risk Committee. The Chair thanked the CEO for her report. In relation to budget, The Chair enquired whether CRC to look elsewhere for funding.

The CEO responded that CRC already receives other funding from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and in the past from the SEUPB and IFI, so it is permitted with TEO agreement. She advised that the department had been considering CRC's position in relation to delivery of the small grants under the new European programme but other than forwarding a list of the open calls and new programmes there had been nothing further since the last discussion.

In relation to help with our funding schemes the CEO noted that in respect of going to external funders, there is no funder that she is aware of that will give money to run our own funding schemes.

The Chair noted that he accepts the current situation, but he advised that if he was to take another term, he would want reassurance from TEO that CRC would be able to develop and not plateau as there is still work to be done. The chair felt there was potential to up the level of engagement, but more resources and staff would be needed.

Ms Simpson advised the decision is difficult because no ownership has been taken of this area of public policy during the period when there were no ministers.

Ms Braniff advised her concern is trying to navigate decisions whenever CRC does not have resources and does not know what the Programme for Government will be. Ms Branniff advised part of her natural response would be to see what CRC can come up with itself as an organisation, but it would be difficult as the Board appointment process has still to be completed.

The Chair noted several points that he intends to raise in his appraisal meeting with TEO to highlight the concerns the Board have:

- I. Request information on what the Programme for Government will include that is relevant to CRC.
- II. Request the timetable for the revised T:BUC strategy, so CRC can set its vision for the future in that context.
- III. Request clarity on the financial situation – CRC is a small organisation, there is an issue on stability. The organisation is struggling to attract staff, it's been challenging without a review of the salary scales.

The CEO advised that CRC's experience has been less severe than some organisation, but many public bodies are struggling with not having enough staff and working with agency staff. Many are also struggling with the challenge of filling Board positions.

The CEO thanked the Chair for his plan to raise these issues with TEO as it is important that they are aware of the struggles the organisation has faced due to the lack of funding to either maintain or recruit staff.

The Chair thanked the CEO for her update and the board for the discussion.

Mr J McCallister joined the meeting.

#### **4015/24      Funding and Development**

##### **I.      Funding Directorate Update**

Mr B McDonald provided a brief overview on the Core Fund Scheme<sup>20 23/24</sup>. The first cycle of payments is complete. The second cycle is underway as groups close off their grants for the year. In relation to one of the outstanding issues from the last Board meeting was related to Harmony Trust, this has now been resolved and the group will remain in the Core Fund for the second year of their funding.

Another outstanding issue which was with Intercomm is ongoing. Ms N Maguire is in contact with the organisation on how to move forward.

The Building Community Resource Centre which was discussed the last time the Board met is undergoing a change in management. The previous manager had advised that the group would be withdrawing from funding from CRC. Mr B McDonald intends to contact them to confirm they are removing themselves from the second part of the grant award entirely.

Mr B McDonald highlighted that CRC had been able to offer the thousand-pound cost of living payment to all Core Funded groups as discussed at the previous meeting and most of them have accepted this payment.

The assessment for the Core Fund 2024-25 has been completed, ten out of the eleven groups will be awarded what they asked for. As agreed by the Board one group has been offered a reduced amount due to the funds that are likely to be available and the outcome of the assessment of their application, however they are aware and content with this.

The appeals process is open until Wednesday 24th April 2024. Mr B. McDonald thanked Mr J McCallister and Mr M McDonnell for being part of the appeal panel. Mr B McDonald advised that at present CRC has received two appeals.

In relation to the CRCD grant scheme, Mr B McDonald noted that it started the year at £135K however CRC was able to make offers of around £180K by year end.

The North Belfast Strategic Good Relations Programme 2023/24 is ongoing, however everything that needs to be accrued for the final accounts has been. Mr B McDonald noted he is meeting with TEO on Tuesday 23rd April 2024 to complete a review process for the 2024/25 awards. As this is a closed scheme no one will get funded for the following year until their delivery plan is approved. In response to a query about the future of the Programme, Mr. B McDonald said it was not yet clear what ministers plan to do with it. The Chair asked in relation to the work of the groups, if there were any cross over issues with other funding. Mr B McDonald advised a lot of their work does overlap with other projects, but it is not directly related to what the North Belfast Scheme funds.

Mr B McDonald advised that the interviews for the Core Fund Officer will take place on Thursday 25th April 2024 and shortlisting has been completed. Ms J Hamiton has returned to work after a period of sickness. Ms S Jones has moved across from her temporary position as Vouching and Verification Officer to join the Funding and Development team to provide maternity cover.

The Chair suggested meeting with some groups during a Board meeting and hearing a presentation from them. The CEO reminded members that this was something the Board used to do prior to Covid. It was agreed that future Board meetings would circulate around the region and the agenda would include a presentation from funded groups.

#### **4016/24            Community Engagement**

##### **I.     Engagement Directorate Update**

Mr. Day advised members that it had been a busy period for the team since the last Board meeting, with the Good Relations Awards in Mossley mill, the Good Relations Week launch and meetings with TEO. It had all been a positive experience especially having First and Deputy First Ministers and the junior ministers to give recognition that what CRC is doing is valuable work. Mr Day said he was delighted with the staff team and the support from ASG for these events.

He thanked those Board members who were able to attend. He advised that 150 people had attended at Mossley Mill for the Engagement Forum and 200 at Girdwood. Mr Day felt that the excellent numbers were helped by the fact that CRC is working with Volunteer Now and Together. This helped reach people from their mailing lists that CRC would not have had contact with previously.

Carl Frampton and ministers attending created a great impression for CRC. The fact these opportunities were then made with UTV/ITV News and TalkSport was also great. It is hoped that CRC will see the outcomes of this in wider engagement at future events.

Mr Day felt it helps build our profile and makes others want to join in. As an example, he noted that CRC had received communication from the NI Housing Council which wants to join in the Good Relations Awards in 2025.

Ms Tandon advised the sound at the Good Relations Week launch wasn't good. She couldn't hear the Chair at all. Ms Tandon also informed the Board that she was made aware that feedback was given that there was more minority ethnic representation but no representation from the LGBT+ community. Mr Day advised all communities received an invite but unfortunately not all could attend.

Mr J McCallister advised he saw CRC and the Good Relations Week launch had a large presence on X. He advised that it is important to emphasise the social media aspect as Good Relations week as that affects all ages and audiences.

The Chair and Board thanked Mr Day for the hard work his team have demonstrated.

#### **4017/24 Verbal Update on the Finance and General Purposes committee held on 8th April 2024.**

The Chair welcomed Niamh Maguire, the new Vouching and Verification Officer to her first Finance and General Purposes Committee meeting at CRC.

The committee reviewed the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter Performance Report. Except for the funding schemes that did not open due to the budget cut and those items that had been superseded during the year, all actions had been successfully completed despite the ongoing staffing shortages. Details will be presented again in the Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24 once completed. The F+GP committee had thanked the team for achieving this outcome despite the ongoing staffing difficulty.

The Chair noted that the committee had reviewed the Management Accounts. CRC will close the year within the 1.5% budget tolerance level, a great achievement given the challenging financial year for CRC and the groups it funds.

In relation to the annual pay remit, the Chair noted that 21/22 has been paid but CRC now have three cycles open; 22/23 has been submitted but is outstanding; 23/24 negotiations are not finalised yet and there will shortly be a 24/25 pay remit. The lack of a speedier approach in central government to approving pay remits for ALBs after pay awards have been negotiated across the civil service is also affecting recruitment. For example, when CRC advertises a role, it must list salary as under review, leaving the organisation offering a lower salary than others in the job market. The Chair intends to raise this at the next TEO meeting with Arms-Length Bodies.

The committee had asked for an updated organisational chart, and this was included in the papers for today's Board meeting.

An update on expenditure related to agency staff was received at the meeting.

An update on vouching and verification was also received by the committee. The committee was advised that the risk-based approach adopted in the last two years had worked and is likely to continue this year.

The committee was updated on the work of the pension sub-group. The recommendations approved at the last meeting of the pension subgroup were added into the revised Business Case, which was then forwarded to The Executive Office before Ms Kelly left CRC. Prior to her departure Ms Kelly had provided TEO with the work she had done so far on the financial aspects. Mr Garrity will deal with any follow up queries on the financial element.

The committee was advised that the Sexual Domestic Abuse policy and Menopause at work policy had been updated based on the previous committee discussion and sent to Peninsula for legal proofing. They will now be added into the staffing handbook.

The committee was updated on recruitment. The DFAP Director post has been advertised and shortlisting for a Core Funding Officer has taken place with interviews planned.

There has been a decrease in overall sickness from last year to this year.

The committee was advised that due to the departure of Ms. Kelly, Mr Garrity, the Interim Finance Manager would be completing tasks the Director of Finance, Admin and Personnel would normally have undertaken. The committee were advised for this to be successful Mr Garrity would need to liaise with third parties such as NILGOSC and have information such as confidential passwords. The committee approved this temporary measure. The committee also approved the payment of the Interim Finance Manager's professional fees for the year.

The committee was updated on the IT support contract with ECNI. Following discussions with Central Procurement Directorate and a procurement exercise, ECNI has now confirmed that a new IT company started by former ECNI IT staff members will be providing IT support for the next year.

#### **4018/24 Minutes of Finance and General Purposes Committee held on 15th<sup>th</sup> January 2024**

The minutes of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held on 15th January were noted.

#### **4019/24 Staffing Update**

Ms J Adamson has sent apologies to this meeting. The CEO referred members of the staffing included in the Board papers. The CEO advised that staffing had been largely covered in her update earlier in the meeting, including the issue of the pay-remit process and how salary scales have an impact on fairness to staff who are working with us now but also when we go out to appoint and recruit, as we are constantly saying that salaries are under review, and because ours are generally one band lower than most of the ALBs we are uncompetitive in the job market.

Board members noted they felt the updated organisational chart was very helpful.

#### **i. 4020/24 Management Accounts**

The CEO provided an update on behalf of Mr P Garrity based on his paper to the Board. The CEO took the Board through the highlight report on the March Accounts. It was noted in terms of the final budget CRC ended up with just £30,714 short of being able to completely spend that budget.

The CEO thanked all staff for this achievement particularly given the difficult position due to lack of resources and staff.

The CEO also thanked Mr P Garrity who kept a close eye on the expenditure throughout the entire year and made sure CRC spent as much as it could throughout the year.

In relation to the grants, the CEO noted that all the carry forwards from 21/22 and 22/23 have been closed off and the team are now just dealing with accruals for the 23/24 year.

The CEO advised that CRC was within the 1.5% tolerance level, this is a target set by the department which all ALB's must remain within.

The Chair thanked Mr P Garrity and all staff for their work and advised that it was remarkable that CRC had done so much.

#### **4021/24**

##### **(i) Verbal update on the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee meeting held on 11th April 2024**

As Mr. McCallister was delayed on the day of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, Mr McDonnell chaired the meeting and provided the update to the Board.

The external audit will start on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2024. It will be carried out by Cavanagh Kelly on behalf of the NIAO.

The field work for this year's internal audits has been completed. The reports will come to the next ARAC committee along with the annual assurance statement. At this stage the auditors have no concerns and there was nothing they wished to bring to the committee's attention.

The areas audited were:

- i. Grant administration
- ii. Review of Finance and General Purposes Committee
- iii. Follow up review.

In relation to the risk register the first risk which related to the pay remit and the pension uplift remains red. The committee received an update on the actions taken place since the last meeting which were set out in the risk register, including the update of the business case based on TEO feedback and the meeting with the union. At present there is no date for a follow up meeting with TEO. Since submission of the revised business case Úna Kelly has left to take up a new position. However, the Interim Finance Manager, Mr. Garrity is assisting with any queries on the financial aspects of the business case.

The status of the second risk, which was staffing was red at the last meeting was approved to remain red until the posts are filled. The committee received an update on the status of recruitment. The committee was advised that during the recent Finance and General-Purpose Committee on Monday 8th April 2024, the committee had given authorisation for Mr Garrity to assist with third party responses (to NILGOSC etc) on behalf of CRC due to the vacancy in the post of Director of Finance, Admin and Personnel.

In relation to the third risk, the NILGOSC pension scheme/McCloud remedy there was no change, and it was recommended the risk remains at amber.



In relation to the risk related to finance resources, as reported earlier in this Board meeting no budget has been received for 2024/25 so the committee was content to leave this risk at amber. In relation to the last risk, which was related to IT, the committee was content to move the risk from amber to green as a contract has now been awarded by ECNI for delivering the support services for IT this year, following collaboration with CPD on procurement.

The committee reviewed the Register of Audit Recommendations. There is now only one remaining recommendation on the register which relates to the pension uplift issue. It was agreed that the implementation date be changed from the end of March 2024 to the end of June. It is unlikely the work will be completed by then, but it will ensure the focus is kept on this.

There are no current investigations into Funded Groups

The committee was advised of three new pieces of guidance as noted in the papers for the meeting: approval of Pay remits relating to 23/24, department annual reports and accounts 23/24 guidance and new developments to business case guidance.

The slow timeframe for the DoF/TEO clearance of the annual pay remit was discussed and the committee advised that this matter had also been raised by the Chair at the Finance and General Purposes Committee as he intends to raise it at the next ALB Forum meeting.

There were no direct awards to discuss at the meeting. There was one purchase without a price check which related to a shared learning event with funded groups.

#### **i. Risk Register**

The Board members noted the risk register included in the Board papers and the Chair advised there was nothing additional that needs to be added to the register that isn't already documented with an accurate status.

#### **ii. Minutes of Audit and Risk Assurance Committee held on 22nd February 2024**

The minutes were noted by the Board.

#### **4022/24 A.O.B.**

Ms Braniff advised that she will be convening the Funding Subgroup. Ms Braniff advised she intends to draft an agenda based on the issues that will be discussed and she will circulate it to the Board and arrange the meeting to be held at Ulster University. It's anticipated a morning would cover this. The Board agreed and Ms M Branniff will send dates to Ms N Woodside to arrange this meeting.

Ms Tandon advised she is unable to attend the next schedule Board meeting. Ms Woodside will send an email to all Board members advising of the date and will confirm if the meeting will be quorate or whether a new date will be required.

#### **4023/24 Date of Next Meeting**

24th May 10:30am CRC offices.

5<sup>th</sup> July 10:30am CRC offices.

13<sup>th</sup> September 10:30am CRC offices.

