

**MINUTES OF THE TWO HUNDRED AND FORTIETH MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY RELATIONS
COUNCIL BOARD HELD ON FRIDAY 26TH JANUARY 2024 10:30AM
VIA ZOOM.**

3968/24 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), Mr J McCallister (Board Member).

3969/24 In Attendance: Dr J Irwin (CEO), Mr P Day (Engagement Director), Ms U Kelly (DFAP Director), Mr B McDonald (Funding Director) Ms N Woodside (EA to CEO and Board).

3970/24 Observers: Mr D Mercer (Boardroom Apprentice)

3971/24 Apologies: Ms C Harris (Board Member) Mr R Campbell (Board Member), Ms S McClelland, (Board Member) Ms M Braniff (Board Member)

3972/24 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*

There were no declarations of interest.

3973/24 Welcome

The Chair welcomed Nicola Woodside, temporary EA to CEO during Hannah George's maternity leave.

3974/24 Minutes

Members reviewed the minutes of the 239th meeting of the Board which took place on 14th November 2023. The Board approved these minutes.

3975/24 Matters Arising

The Chair presented the Board with an update on the matters arising from previous meetings.

Board members will continue to be provided with details of events hosted by Core groups, Engagement Forums, and Shared Learning Forums to enable them to attend when they can.

Board members will receive a presentation on Peace Monitoring report 6 at the Board Staff Planning day. Members were reminded to return their evaluation and appraisal forms as these are now overdue.

The Chair advised the potential dates for the Board Staff Planning day are either 12th or 14th February 2024.

The Chair reminded all members to complete their 'Conflict of Interest' forms urgently as this is required from an audit and governance perspective.

3976/24 Correspondence

Correspondence from the TEO dated 8th January 2024 confirming the increase in budget for 2023/24 was noted.

3977/24 Chair's Update

The Chair provided an update on various engagements and activities.

The Chair attended the Pension subgroup on Monday 18th December 2024 and attended a meeting with staff and Unite representatives on Wednesday 20th December 2024.

The Chair asked Ms U Kelly if CRC had received any feedback from the department on the Pension business case. Ms U Kelly reported she and the CEO attended a meeting with TEO on Tuesday 16th January 2024. The verbal feedback was positive in that they were happy with the shortened version of the business case; however, they have not yet reviewed it in detail. CRC has asked for written comments, when they are received the pension subgroup will be reconvened. CRC haven't received those yet but expect something next week.

The Chair advised that the TEO ALB Forum meeting on Wednesday 17th January 2024, due to take place at Stormont Estate, was moved to a Zoom meeting due to extreme weather conditions.

The Chair met with the CEO and her EA on 24th January 2024 for preparation for this Board meeting.

3978/24 Chief Executive Officer's Update

The CEO welcomed Nicola Woodside to the post covering Hannah Georges Maternity Leave.

The CEO presented her report and highlighted the following:

The first draft of the Strategic Plan 2024/27 and the first draft of the operational plan 2024/25 are both on the agenda for this board meeting. The CEO noted that the strategic plan is a review of the delivery of the current strategy and initial thoughts on the focus for the new strategy. At this stage the draft is close to what ministers have approved in the current strategy as many of the themes are still relevant.

The CEO updated on the financial and staffing situation.

The CEO noted that the TEO funders forum meeting will take place on Wednesday 7th February 2024.

She noted that the pension subgroup had met on Monday 18th December 2023 to review the updated business case which was then submitted to the Executive Office on Tuesday 2nd January 2024. No feedback has been received yet. The CEO thanked Una and her team for completing this review of the business case.

The CEO noted that the Accountability and Liaison meeting due to take place with TEO Monday 22nd January 2024 was postponed due to illness of a TEO staff member and has been reconvened for Wednesday 31st January 2024.

The CEO noted that the T:BUC forum has now been confirmed for Tuesday 12th March 2024 at Mossley Mill. She noted that CRC had received 70 nominations for this year's Good Relations Awards. She thanked Peter and his team for the work that went into promoting this year's awards.

The CEO noted the launch of the Peace Monitoring report on Thursday 21st December 2023 which was very well attended. The board will receive a presentation on the report at their planning day.

The CEO noted that the Kesh/Ederney/Pettigo project wishes to continue to have CRC involved in its application to Peace Plus, albeit CRC does not wish to be lead partner. A meeting took place with the group on Monday 4th December 2023. CRC will focus on supporting the shared learning element on this project.

The CEO noted that the Queens University workshop due to take place on Thursday 18th January 2024 was postponed and will now take place on Wednesday 21st February 2024.

The CEO noted that internal audit field work will take place in weeks commencing 4th and 11th March 2024.

The Chair asked the CEO about the change in arrangements for internal audit quality assurance which had been mentioned at the recent Arms-Length Bodies Forum. The CEO advised that previously TEO had conducted all quality assurance reviews of internal audit provision. However, TEO has now decided that it is up to the agencies that provide internal audit to themselves ensure that they have up to date quality assurance checks. The CEO advised that this was discussed at the ALB Forum because communication around this change to ALBs was very poor and had led to confusion.

The CEO advised that TEO had now agreed to circulate information about this which CRC and other ALBs can then share with their Auditors. If there is an audit body that is being used by a number of ALBs the audit company may be able to use one external quality assurance as a form of verification evidence for the other bodies.

Ms U Kelly advised that although the cost of this was to be passed from TEO to the audit agencies it was likely that the cost would be transferred into the fee to ALBs which may be revised for the future years. The CEO agreed that although advised by TEO at the ALB Forum that there would be no cost implications, increases are likely to come indirectly. It was clear at the ALB Forum that this was not common knowledge to members. Since the meeting no written communication from TEO has yet arrived on this matter.

The Chair asked the CEO about the event she attended in London. The CEO advised that as she understood, number ten had organised events previously in relation to a celebration for Scotland and Wales and this one was for Northern Ireland. The CEO reported there were people involved in community and voluntary activities as well as of the private sector present at the event. The CEO

reported that the Prime Minister attended and visited a number of display tables at the event however there were no speeches.

Ms N Tandon advised she also attended this event. She reported she felt it would have been better if the event had been held in Northern Ireland and members from London attended over here due to the travel costs involved for the numbers of people travelling to London.

The Board thanked the CEO for her report.

3979/24 CRC Strategic Plan 2024-2027

The CEO introduced the draft Strategic Plan 2024/27. She noted that the draft currently focuses on the review of the last strategy, and an update of our planning assumptions and a tidy up of the wording of the draft strategic aims. She advised that the board staff planning day will examine the external environment through presentations on Peace Monitor 6; examples of impact measurement including social value, trust and hopefully everyday peace building; and a review of the issues coming from our funded groups. The CEO noted that the draft will be subject to further revision based on board feedback, comments from ministers (if they return), the T:BUC review and the new programme for government. The CEO advised members that the emphasis in this draft is very much on encouraging a systematic joined up approach across partners in government, other public agencies, and the community. She advised members that the order of material in this draft strategy is slightly different to that in the current strategy. She also noted that the introduction from the Chair will be added before the draft goes to public consultation. On page 4 she noted no change to the **'BACKGROUND'** Page 5 there is no change to **'WHAT WE DO'** expect for a slight tidy up of wording and the image. There is no change to the **'VISION AND VALUES'**. She noted that **'CONTEXT AND PLANNING ASSUMPTIONS'** have all been updated (pages 7-11). The **'REVIEW OF OUR DELIVERY'** during the last strategic planning period 2020/24 has been updated based on the output over those years (page 12-17). The CEO noted that **'HOW WE KNOW WE ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE'** is unchanged. Under **'STRATEGIC PRIORITIES'** the CEO noted that the three broad areas remain the same as there is no anticipated structural change at this change. She took members through the key points under Funding, Engagement and Governance. She noted that the appendices will be subject to change if we have a new Programme for Government and T:BUC strategy.

The CEO advised members on a number of external speakers due to attend the Board/Staff planning day. Numerous topics would be covered, such as social value, trust and how to measure everyday peacebuilding. The CEO reported that she are hoping to have Dr. Grainne Kelly, from Ulster University to discuss everyday peace building. The CEO reported that if Ms Kelly was not available for that day we can arrange for her to attend a board meeting shortly after. The CEO reported that although outcome accountability and outcome measurement is vital to do, it only gives us some information but not everything that we need to make an assessment and evaluate what makes the biggest difference to community relations in our society.

The Chair noted that it is potentially the worst time to make a new strategy, particularly when the T:BUC review is still in the air and we await a Programme for Government so it is difficult to decide on making changes.

The Chair also noted that CRC doesn't even know whether it will still have the same board members over the next year, will they be asked to serve a full second term or will short term extensions to first

term appointments be continued? He felt that it may be necessary to apply pressure to get a decision on this. Chair noted three years is too short for a strategic timeframe and he recommended a longer timescale.

The CEO agreed with the Chair that the timeframe for the current strategic plan was not long enough, for example during a large part of the period there was no change that could be made to policy in the absence of Ministers. It was agreed that the timeframe for the new strategic plan should be 5 years.

The Chair advised that the Board/Staff Planning day should be used to discuss how CRC can widen the community of interest around good relations, including health and environmental professionals, potentially using a forum or a network. The Chair advised there is still a long way to go to develop the T:BUC Forum to help with the development of this community of interest and as well as our roles as facilitators of the event, we need to have a position on the agenda for these T:BUC forums, to help change the direction and ensure we are fully engaged.

The Chair invited Darren Mercer to the Board/staff planning day as external advice is always welcome.

The Board thanked the CEO for her work on the Strategic Plan and approved the draft subject to further discussion of external issues at the Board/Staff planning day.

3980/24 CRC Operational Plan 2024-2025

The CEO presented the first draft of the Operational Plan 2024-25. The CEO noted that the draft was subject to there being no return of Ministers and therefore no outcome of the T:BUC review or a new Programme for Government. However, if this changed the draft could be revised if necessary. She advised members that the titles of corporate outcomes are in line with the draft strategic plan presented to the board today. Under funding she noted that media and publications grants will only open if CRC receives sufficient funds. She also noted that participation in TEO assessment panels will be subject to CRC having sufficient staff. Under engagement the CEO noted that most of the planned activity would be familiar to board members however on page 18 she drew members attention to plans to relaunch CRC's research journal called Shared Space. Under governance the CEO noted that there were no new commitments however there is a full calendar of existing activities.

The Chair reported that he was happy to commend the draft CRC Operational Plan, all members agreed.

3981/24 Funding and Development

Brian McDonald, Director of Funding and Development presented his paper and updated Board members on a number of matters. He provided board members with an update on the Small Grants Scheme, Core Fund, North Belfast Programme and the work with District Council good relations officers.

Mr B McDonald advised the Donegal pass programme was funded for one year, the intention was to bring on an apprentice to carry out this work however this has not yet happened. The individual in charge has undertaken the research for community engagement, the work is being done however what they are being funded for has not been completed.

Mr B McDonald advised we are currently one member short on the panel for 21st March 2024, although is still waiting on replies from board members to confirm their availability. If we can't get another board member the Chair has approved Michael McDonnell can join the panel to ensure we have enough numbers.

Mr. B McDonald has advised the CRCD fund will remain open until 2nd February 2024. There is very minimal underspend, around seven thousand pounds left in the budget and around twenty thousand of bids sitting in the system. The potential is there, subject to the Board's agreement that the scheme can remain open for a few weeks beyond 2nd February if necessary. The Chair and Board members agreed to this contingency measure.

The Chair thanked Mr. B McDonald for his report and commended the speed with which he had taken command of his new role.

3982/24 Community Engagement

Peter Day Director of Engagement presented the evaluation of Good Relations Week 2023. He also took members through the recommendations paper. The Chair and Members commended the evaluation report and approved the recommendations.

Mr Day presented his paper and updated Board members on a number of matters including T:BUC Engagement Forum, Good Relations Week, Shared Learning Forums, Website, Social Media and Email marketing, Stakeholder Engagement and Good Relations Awards.

Mr Day advised we have received 75 award nominations this year. We had 14 nominations in the volunteer category, 13 for youth, 13 for connecting and 17 for community champion.

The Chair encourages all Board members and invited Darren Mercer to attend the next T:BUC Engagement Forum day at Mossley Mill if possible.

P Day has been working with the district councils to prepare for an event that has been organised for Tuesday 30th January 2024, in Cookstown, around regional collaboration, monitoring evaluation and the future of that programme.

The Chair thanked Mr P Day for his report and the work of the Engagement Team.

3983/24 Finance and General Purposes

(1) Staffing

Ms U Kelly provided an update on recruitment. She advised interviews for the Verification Officer post are happening Thursday 1st February 2024 with an anticipated April 2024 start date.

The Grant Project Officer maternity cover is still open so at present Ms Kelly was unable to give the total number of application numbers. The application pack is being prepared currently for the Core Fund Officer role and is due to be finalised next week hopeful also for an April start.

The recruitment for the Finance Manager vacancy is on hold at present due to the other roles being critical and the post being very adequately filled by Mr. Garrity on a temporary basis.

Nicola Woodside is temporarily covering Hannah George's maternity leave.

Mrs A Simpson (Board Member) enquired about the financial implication of continuing to use agency staff. Ms Kelly confirmed that there was sufficient financial cover and this is kept under review.

The Chair thanked Ms U Kelly for the update on staffing.

(ii) Purchases Orders

The financial update on the purchase order for temporary staff provided in the papers for the Board meeting was noted.

The Board approved the Purchase Order for the NIAO 2022-23 audit fee.

Ms Kelly notified members of a forthcoming Purchase Order that will require Board approval. The purchase order relates to external support to deliver Goods Relations Week. Ms U Kelly advised the closing date Monday 19th February 2024. She reported that normally it would be issued to the Board but with the next board meeting not being until Friday 8th March 2024, the timescales wouldn't work. As this procurement is an annual occurrence and familiar to Board members she requested that it be handled by written procedure.

The Chair offered that if the Board members agreed, it can be digitally sent to him for authorisation. The Board agreed.

(iii) Verbal update on the Finance and General Purposes meeting held on 15th January

The Chair updated members on the recent meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee which met on Monday 15th January.

He advised that the committee noted that the Peace Monitor Report was published in December. A presentation from the authors is hoped to take place at the Board/Staff Strategic planning day in February.

The Committee reviewed the 3rd quarter performance report and noted that progress has been on track despite the staff shortages.

The Committee reviewed the Management Accounts. CRC had received a positive response to its request for additional in-year funds to cover items such as depreciation, capital expenditure. We have no information on next year's budget at this stage.

The committee received an update on expenditure related to agency costs.

An update was provided on the position in relation to vouching and verification as we approach the end of the financial year. There are some grant de-commitments which are being reallocated. Budget cuts elsewhere are affecting some groups capacity to utilise the grant CRC has given them and some also have staffing issues, including difficulty sourcing new staff. The committee expressed concern about this but was pleased to hear that TEO has revised CRC's Cash allocation as requested and this has resolved fear that some claims might not be payable before the year end.

In relation to the pension issue, the committee was advised that no feedback had been received from TEO yet on the draft Business Case which was submitted on 2nd January 2024.

In relation to review of policies, Committee members approved updates to the Record Management policy. This will be reviewed again when CRC moves fully to cloud based filing. Committee members also approved an updated and more streamlined Data Protection Policy, subject to the addition of

contact details for the local Information Commissioner Office. The committee also provided feedback on the latest version of the Domestic & Sexual Abuse Policy and the Menopause Policy. The policies were approved subject to confirmation that social services notification has been adequately covered in the revised policy. The CRC Agile Working policy has been reviewed against the NICS version and staff feedback and approved.

The current position in relation to staff vacancies was discussed and it is hoped that these will be filled shortly.

In relation to sick absence Committee were advised that the numbers of long-term absences and costs were down from £18k to £11k for same period last year.

Members were reminded to submit outstanding expenses claims by 8th March and for the month ending March 2024 by 9th April to ensure CRC is able to facilitate the new faster closure requirements.

The Board thanked the Chair for the update on the recent Finance and General Purposes Committee meeting.

(iv) Minutes of Finance and General Purposes Committee meeting held on 11th October 2023

The approved minutes of the previous meeting were noted by Board members.

3984/24 Audit and Risk Assurance

(i) Verbal update on the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee meeting held on 11th January

Mr J McCallister updated members on the recent meeting of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee which met on Thursday 11th January 2024.

The NIAO presented the final version of the RTTCWG was agreed at last meeting and confirmed the 2022/23 Accounts were certified on 22nd Nov 2023.

The NIAO advised members that whilst Cavanagh Kelly were now contracted to complete this year's audit of CRC, NIAO still holds overall responsibility, and the C+AG will sign of the final report and NIAO staff will still attend meetings.

It is anticipated that the Audit Strategy will come to the next meeting of the Audit and Risk Committee, following a meeting between CRC finance staff, NIAO and Cavanagh Kelly..

Mr. Clerkin confirmed that this year's internal audits would cover Grant Administration, a review of the work of the Finance and General Purposes Committee and the normal follow-up on last year's recommendations. Terms of reference for these audits will be issued shortly. The audits are scheduled to take place in weeks beginning 4th and 11th March.

The risk register was reviewed as usual:

Pay Remit – Current status red: no change

Staffing – Current status Amber: Members were updated on staffing and agreed to move to this risk to Red.

External Audit Fee –As this risk is now green members agreed that it can now be removed.

NILGOS Pension Scheme –Current status Amber: no change

Resource – Current status Amber: Although CRC has received an in-year uplift following its bid in the autumn. Concern was expressed by staff and committee members on the risk of not being able to spend the recently agreed budget (both resource and cash) by the end of the financial year due to the late timing of the approval. It was agreed that this risk be kept at Amber.

The register of audit recommendations was reviewed and with the completion of two items only one recommendation remains outstanding – this relates to the long-standing pension matter.

There are currently no investigations into funded groups.

The FREM DOF guidance in relation to preparation of the 2023-24 accounts was provided in the papers for the committee meeting. The faster closing timetable was raised as a concern, given the normal timetable for the NIAO audit. This will be looked at again when we have the audit strategy for this year. In the meantime, processes in relation to reporting on this year's accounts are already underway and Paul Garrity is responding to requests for information from the Department of Finance on this matter. Members were reminded to submit expenses for 2023-24 as soon as possible to ensure timely preparation of accounts.

There were no direct awards reported at this meeting. Some small purchases without a Price Check in relation to Good Relations Week 2023 were reported.

The Chair asked if Cavanagh Kelly are new to CRC or if we have worked with them before. Ms U Kelly advised they were procured to assist with the production of CRC Annual Report and Accounts last year.

The Chair and Board members thanked Mr. McCallister for his update on the recent meeting of the Audit and Risk Assurance **Committee**.

(ii) Minutes of Audit and Risk Assurance Committee meeting held on 14th November 2023

The approved minutes of the meeting and the risk register were noted by Board members.

3985/24 A.O.B.

None

3986/24 Date of Next Meeting

Friday 8th March 2023 10:30AM.